IN THE TWO generations before the National Covenant, Scottish divines produced a substantial body of material, including catechisms, biblical expositions, treatises, sermons, and poems. Some of the material was published in London and became part of the larger British market for divinity, while English works were marketed and sometimes even printed in Scotland. Clearly the Borders did not generally mark a disruption in the theological continuum of the island. Thus, to a considerable degree, Scottish theology and piety are to be seen not as indigenous plants, but as part of an international Reformed theological culture. It is no surprise to find that what Scottish divines had to say about women is not unique, and that modern scholarship about women in seventeenth-century English religion is commonly transferable to Scotland.

Women make frequent appearances in Scottish divinity. Scottish divines, like their English counterparts, were interested first and foremost in the salvation of human souls; hence their prevailing interest with ‘practical divinity’, the stuff of life, including male and female experience. This chapter will survey what Scottish divinity of the time had to say about women, what it shows us about the place of women in the life of religion, and how important feminine imagery was to the articulation of the Christian message.

A bound volume in the Laing manuscripts at the University of Edinburgh contains a copy of a printed catechism along with some sheets of handwritten material from the 1640s. A few of these leaves are devoted to women, including some playful verses, but there is another sheet that raises one’s interest to a higher level. It is entitled ‘The praise of women’ and begins its series of statements thus:

1. Women were the first cause of dwelling together in townes, villages, freedomes & congregations.
2. Women were the first inventars of letters & art of wrytting . . .
3. Thei were the first inbringers & ordainers of lawes, & statutes, politick, civill & morall.¹

These and other statements may have come straight from Christine de Pizan’s Book of the City of Ladies, written c.1405.² How did the student have access to her work? Was it discussed in a lecture, of which these are the ‘dictates,’ i.e. lecture notes? Whatever the answers, Christine’s advanced notions about her sex were not definitive of woman’s place in
Scotland. As elsewhere, women were viewed according to traditional assumptions about the content of the Bible, with a good dose of Aristotle mixed in, pointing toward an inherent inferiority. John Weemes wrote rather predictably that as Christ is the head of the church, man, 'the more excellent sexe,' has lordship over the woman, 'the infirmer sex'. He noted that man was more gifted than she, thus 'he should instruct and teach her', while she should respond with 'subjection, obedience, and reverence', to be done 'cherefully, readily and constantly'. Archibald Simson's prayer for a woman in labour expressed the theology of gender that lurked within the masculine theological mind:

... And because this paine of mine hath come to all Women, by the transgressions of Eva the first Woman, let me remember that sinne is the mother of these pangues, forasmuch as all have sinned, and must be partakers of their sorrowes. O Lord, I confess I have sinned with the rest of my Sexe, and I am now punished with them, as thou gavest out sentence against them all. But, Lord, I pray thee, for Jesus sake, who was the Seede of the Woman, that thou wouldest loose the bandes of my sinne.

Female inferiority meant that while it would be thought a compliment to speak of women as having 'masculine mynds', or, in Mary's case, bearing up in the face of Christ's death 'with a manly countenance', it was a means of denigration to refer to a man in feminine terms. In 1619 Walter Balcanquhall complained of 'female foolish Rhetorick' at the synod of Dort. Despite the almost casual and unthinking fashion in which divines referred to the innate and immutable inferiority of women, they were still dogged by ambivalence. As Mary Maples Dunn has written, 'Puritans certainly brought in their baggage a sense of the inferiority of women; but belief in female equality before the Lord also made it uncertain what role women would play in a new religious order'. Subjection was woven into a draft of the wedding ceremony. A woman was to be her husband's helper and 'to give subjection and obedience to him in the Lord'. Underwritten by divine law, natural law, and conscience, she must respond with 'subjection and obedience', according to Robert Rollock who was referring only to a wife's behaviour toward her husband. In a striking analogy to contemporary political divinity which denied absolute power to any earthly potentate, so a wife's duty to her human head is circumscribed by 'lawfull, honest, agreeable to the will of the Lord'. Lindsay wrote that a woman must not behave so as to please her husband if it meant offending God, and Wariston was upset that he had compelled his first wife to do something which was both sinful in itself and contrary to her will.
Weemes avowed that there were no grounds for a man to despise his wife and he specifically rebuked men who held high conceits of themselves in contrast to their women. Wariston’s diary again illustrates the point. The morning after their wedding night he and his bride made a ‘pacion’. He promised ‘never to gloume nor glunche on hir befor folks, and shoe vouing never to disobey me in any compagnie’. The mode was certainly conventional, but there was an undeniable concern to maintain mutual dignity and respect. Rollock emphasised that a husband has obligations to his wife. If he has the greater honour, so he must bear the greater burden. The key was to deal with his wife according to ‘a sanctified affection’, defined in terms of Christ’s love for the church, and he was unsparing in his criticism of men who tyrannised over their wives as if ‘it were over a dog or cat’. He utterly rejected the use of physical force: ‘Is it lawful for a man to strike his own flesh? wil not every one that heares or sees that, say: the man is mad, and worse then a brute beast’? Robert Baillie alleged that Robert Browne, the eponymous separatist pioneer, beat his wife implying that it was a suitable failing for a schismatic.

However weak they might be, women were quite capable of subverting the morals of the stronger sex, and thus they were exhorted to be careful of their behaviour and appearance. Archibald Simson blamed Bathsheba for David’s fall into adultery and upheld her as a type of ‘many Women in our dayes, shamelessly haunting such places where they may give occasion to men to lust after them’. In England Thomas Heywood warned women ‘to strive that the beauty of your minds may still exceed that of your bodies, because the first apprehends a noble divinity, the last is subject to all frailty’. Simson concurred saying nothing compared to virtue, natural colour, obedience, love, ‘by which she purchaseth credit with her Husband, and is famous with men’.

The kirk evinced a striking attachment to the feminine in its theological and devotional discourse. Labour in childbirth was a metaphor for both ‘the suddenness of the pains of hell’ and for the appearance of the new person, the person of faith. Maternal love could serve as a fit metaphor for the relation between minister and parish: ‘The Mother seekes the well of her childe, and not his goods, nor honour: so seeke thou the well of thy flocke, and not their goods, nor honour, and let thy affection be motherlie’. ‘Church’ had a lengthy history as a feminine noun, no less in Scotland than elsewhere. James Melville wrote two laments about his beloved kirk, ‘a Queen of great renowne’ whose fame was known throughout Europe; she therefore appealed to King James as the son of her womb. James Inglis wrote to Robert Boyd in 1611: ‘The Kirk of this land her case is very lamentable . . . We that should be her watchmen to cry in her
streets for her wakening and on her watch towers to the Lord by night and day, to have compassion and heal her wounds - we are fast asleep'. William Cowper stated that the Bible uses five figures to describe the relationship of the Christians with Christ: 'First, by a marriage, wherein Christ is the Husband, and we the Spouse'. A recusant woman included in her confession of new faith, undoubtedly with a minister all but moving the pen for her, a similar expression:

And if the Bride, and new married woman forsake, and leave her fathers house to follow her husband: if she leave the sport and pastime of her youth, to goe about her houswifrie, and to conforme her selfe unto her husband: why should not I alas! forsake that which displeaseth thee, to be agreeable unto thy Son Jesus Christ, which in so great mercie hath wedded me?

At death, wrote David Lindsay of Leith, the soul, 'being happily presented a chast virgine, well decked and trimmed with the ornaments of thy glorious husband Jesus, before thy glorious husband Jesus, shalt have that marriage now contracted with him, solemnized and perfectly consummated . . . The Song of Solomon was seminal in this use of language, and James Baillie described the book as Spirit-directed love songs to the church. Forbes of Corse described the Holy Spirit as a wedding gift given by Christ to the church. However, if such language could elevate the church as the bride of Christ, the feminine could also turn harlot. Alexander Hume, the Edinburgh schoolmaster, wrote of the church as Christ's spouse but also as having become, under Roman influence, the 'skarlet whore', while John Murray, echoing Hosea, wrote: 'Oh how is the sometimes faithfull nation going on to become an harlot'.

It is typical to find preachers appealing to the examples of godly women. With reference to Rahab the harlot in Hebrews 11:31 David Dickson preached 'that the Fayth of Women is worthie to bee observed, and imitated, even as well as Mens Fayth'. George Gillespie praised Esther for her willingness to jeopardise her life rather than submit to wrong. Lindsay wrote in praise of aged Anna, 'that religious old widow', who served God constantly with prayers and fasts; one should follow her example. Wariston himself provides a lay witness to homiletical references to Biblical women in the pulpits of Edinburgh.

This willingness to exemplify women carried on beyond the Bible, and indeed beyond the Christian tradition. Lindsay spoke well of a female slave martyred in Lyon in 177: 'Were that Martyr Blandina living to this day, sure I am she would say, albeit there be many men in the world now, yet there be wonderous few Christians in the world now'. Abernethy referred to a pagan woman in his treatment of the mortification of
‘burning lust’. Hypatia was an Alexandrian philosopher and mathematician, born in 370 and murdered by Christian monks in 415. The author wrote: ‘Hypatia (famous because of her erudition and publike teaching) perceiving one of her disciples, for her love, languishing to the death: after many assayed remedies without effect; at last she devised a way to divert his imagination with a filthy spectacle of her self’. In identifying forerunners of puritanism David Calderwood listed Lydia, the widow of Sarepta, Hildegard, and Elizabeth the German.

The most interesting Biblical story in this context is the coming of women to Jesus’s tomb where they become the first to learn of the resurrection. Rollock wrote that the Lord

will have his disciples to sit down in the school of women, to learn of them that glorious resurrection, he will make them to be fools (citing 1 Corinthians 1:27 and 3:18), that they may be made wise, and he will have the women to be their teachers.

He did not suggest therefore that women might continue to teach, and in fact another minister commented on the woman of Samaria in John 4, that she, ‘being but a woman, yet being reproved of her adulteries, & instructed by Christ; I will not say preached, but saith to her neighbours . . ’. Rutherford allowed that when Mary Magdalene was directed from the tomb to report what she had seen there, ‘she is made the first preacher of Christ’s rising from the dead’, but there the matter ends. Charles Ferme wrote that in Romans 16:1, Phoebe was a deaconess. Actually, the Greek the term is ‘deacon’, with no feminine counterpart, but Ferme saw her in traditional terms. Her role is thus defined in concert with I Timothy as she is turned into a hospitable widow. On Romans 16:3 he noted that Prisca appeared before Aquila: ‘so Priscilla, an eminent female, surpassed her husband in the business of the gospel’ and even helped her husband to instruct Apollo. Ferme drew no conclusions and women gained no public role in religious life.

James Melville allowed that mothers will sometimes pray en famille, but that was the full extent and Rutherford held the Christian man of the house responsible for directing the religious life of the family. Several divines thought baptism by women a scandal, an absurdity generated by Rome’s false notion of the necessity of baptism for salvation.

Women did, nevertheless, carve out a public role in religious life, if sometimes in a protesting and even riotous fashion. In 1584, when two of Edinburgh’s ministers were under threat and took flight to England, their wives wrote a feisty letter on their behalf. At Easter 1622, ‘sindrie of the base sort, and some wemen, not of the best, did sit’ rather than kneel. William Annand was attacked by women after his Glasgow synod sermon on behalf of the liturgy. When Lord Binning noted that ‘many
citizens of this towne’ were absent from kneeling communion preferring to attend elsewhere, women were prominent. On 31 October 1637 the Rev. Gavin Young of Ruthwall wrote the earl of Annandale that two weeks earlier there had been a gathering in Edinburgh at which a Supplication against the service book was subscribed by eight hundred persons. ‘Such was the tumult of the wemen and basse peple that the Bishop of Galloway ... was violentlie (set) upon ...’ Henry Guthry noted the inclusion of women in the conspiracy to disrupt the introduction of the prayer book in July 1637. Mob activity could also support Catholic religion for in 1628 Adam Simson of New Abbey, along with his wife and others, were abused by a group of women. But this is surely not the whole of the story. While guided generally and ultimately by male spiritual mentors, as will be seen in the spiritual autobiography of Mistress Rutherford (see below) and Wariston’s diary, Christian women had a real impact on other women and on men through their spiritual counsel.

Two contemporary circumstances bear relating. A minister portrayed Jean Livingston, awaiting execution for plotting the murder of her abusive husband, as moved by the Holy Spirit to edify others. Culprit and minister were agreed that this grace had a wider purpose, that God ‘has set her up to be a preacher of mercy and repentance to us all’, her words ‘as memorials of the great and marvelous grace of God, which we have seen in her’. At the time of the National Covenant Margaret Mitchel came to a degree of prominence, or notoriety. Wariston, whose diary records most of what we know of her, first heard of her from the Reverend Henry Rollock in September 1638. She was given to ecstatic fits in which she spoke about ‘the greatnes, goodnes, and glorious excellency of King Jesus; it was admirable to hear and see the varietie of hir expressions and conceptions on that subject, with the continuat bensel and combined concurrence of all the faculties of hir saule and affections of hir heart’, and Wariston took her utterances as favourable omens of the current enterprise, appreciating her positive impact upon some wavering noblemen. Both were, however, remarkable circumstances that do not define the role of women in religious life.

A Scottish Catholic priest wrote that ‘East Laudiane knawis the love and fidelitie of ane of thair Ministers towards his wyf, wha worriet hir before he passit to his preaching’. Scottish divines were mainly married men and fathers and they made no apology for a married clergy, or their deep affection for their ‘bedfellows’. William Guild maintained the lawfulness of marriage for clergy and Weemes asserted that virginity is not preferable to marriage. Puritan morality dictated that pre-marital chastity should be succeeded by a faithful and loving relationship, where the man ought ‘to delight himselfe with his wife’. On his wedding night,
with his bride already in bed, Wariston ‘thanked the Lord heartily for the keaping thy (i.e. his soul’s) body until that hour from outward pollution of lust quhrto thou haist bein so oft and so sairly tempted’. Wariston, in many respects hardly distinguishable from the clergy, referred to his deceased and greatly missed first wife as ‘my uther half’, now in heaven. Before wedding his second spouse he became troubled by ‘the inordinat excesse of my affection to hir, quhilk disturbed and diverted my devotion in privat religious exercises’. He feared that he was falling into idolatry, and consequently the young couple ‘resolved to temper our affections and set them cheifly on the giver and not on the gift’.

Pastors’ wives were themselves commonly daughters of manses, and it is not rare to find appreciative comments about them, both for their tender care and their religious achievement. John Row married Griselle, daughter of David Ferguson, minister at Dunfermline. She was ‘a verie comlie and beautifull young woman, so shee proved a verie virtuous and godlie person, fitt to be such a minister’s wife’. John Livingston wrote later in life, ‘In June 1635, the Lord graciously pleased to bless me with my wife, who how well accomplished every way, and how faithfull an yoke-fellow, I desire to leave to the memory of others’. Josias Welsh related how his wife prophesied, while he was in London, that the ejected Irish ministers would be restored, but only briefly. ‘He said he was offended then at her peremptory words; but knowing her otherwise to be most modest, he now perceived she knew more of the mind of God than they did’. A friend recommended Robert Boyd’s widow to Boyd’s friend Dr George Sibbald of Leith: ‘she hath given proof of her sincere love, humble and submissive subjection to her husband, and her godly care about the education of her children’. Given this level of mutual affection that emerges often enough in the literature, the closeness of husband and wife might be used to illuminate the reluctance of body and soul to separate. On the other hand, the recusant might be portrayed as an unwilling wife.

Scholars have long commented upon the relations between women and their male pastors, and recently Louise Yeoman has written that one might think ‘that the typical picture of a radical Scots parish was one of the minister, as almost the only activist male, surrounded by a group of enthusiastic parish ladies’. Of course she is well aware of the role of men also, but her point is well made and the phenomenon is best observed in Samuel Rutherford’s famous Letters. David Mathew described Rutherford’s relationship with Lady Kenmure as ‘one of those spiritual intimacies which were becoming a pattern for a Presbyterian lady of quality’. His was not the only instance as parallels may be seen in the careers of other Presbyterian ministers such as Livingston and Robert Boyd. As Mathew noted there is no reason to suggest any scandalous
behaviour, though in the case of William Murray one relationship went too far too soon and more or less terminated his career in the church.63

Such mutual dependencies, which included financial support, even for publication of banned tracts, were noted at the time and drew some disparaging comments.64 The Catholic John Hamilton asked:

What folie is it that wemen, wha can not sew, cairde, nor spin without thay lerne the same of uther skilful wemen, suld usurpe to reid, and interpret the Bible, and apply the texts thairof as thair licht, vaine, and unconstant spirits inventis? I wald exhort thame to remark that thair first mother Eva, for melling hir self with maters of religion, presumand to interpret the command of God concerning the eating of the forbidden Aple, procurit be hir doctrine a curs of God to hir and al woman kynd . . .65

In Henry Leslie's preface to Wentworth we find that Covenanters appeal mainly to women, since 'they allow them to be at least quarter-masters with their husbands'.66

Robert Boyd commented on the people he had known and respected, including a number of women. His cousin Lady Kelwood was 'a virtuouse and wise gentlewoman'.67 Elizabeth Melville, daughter of Sir James Melville of Halhill, wife of John Colville of Culross and close friend of the circle of godly ministers was a religious poet and a piously imperious mother.68 Alexander Hume dedicated his *Hymnes and sacred songs* (Edinburgh, 1599) to her. He saw in her speech, behaviour, and piety 'infallible signes of Sanctification'.

In addition to the death row conversion of Jean Livingston and the confession of an elderly aristocratic convert, there are available to the historian a couple of other more substantial records of women's religious experiences. Bessie Clarksone's struggle for faith was thought worthy of publication, though its lack of satisfactory resolution must have deprived it of the desired impact.69 Of greatest interest for historians may be a manuscript spiritual autobiography of a young woman known to us only as Mistress Rutherford. It covers the years c.1615–30, from early adolescence to early adulthood.70 She supplies us with a catalogue of the religious concerns of her time, and along the way gives some insight into the life of a young woman living on the edges of landed society. This includes attendance at a girl's school in Edinburgh run by Betty Aird (a daughter of an Edinburgh minister), her anxiety over the prospects of marriage and her relationship with prominent Presbyterian ministers in Scotland and in Ireland.

All these works indicate that women were not considered unworthy objects of pastoral care. Women were taught the same religion as men, they were encouraged to enter into the same experience of faith. Charles
Ferme commented on Romans 16 that 'to be the daughter of God in Christ, and through partnership in the common faith, the sister of believers', is the common vocation of a Christian female, concurring well with what Susan Felch has described in an essay on John Knox as 'ungendered Christian godliness'. Women were not excluded from pastoral exhortations. Preachers addressed themselves explicitly to both men and women. The two sexes shared the same corrupt nature, needed the same salvation and both had souls and consciences. Elect men and women belonged to the one church. Sermons and devotional material made explicit references to women. Zachary Boyd commented, by way of stirring his hearers out of dreaded security: 'Many of our weemen if they can say, I am neither whoore nor theefe think that all is well'.

Scottish divinity tried to take women seriously, and to a considerable extent succeeded. If men were the highest authority in the home, they were not to be tyrants or even disciplinarians over their wives, and preachers were emphatic in inculcating marital affection as well as fidelity. Genderless individual piety elevated women to an equal status with men, but as in other areas of public life, divines were prisoners of their culture, and apart from questions of public disorder flowing from traditional notions of kinship, they generally shied away from social reformism. Still, whatever the particulars, it remains that a study of the divinity of the period reveals some interesting facets of female role and experience in early seventeenth-century Scotland.

NOTES


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Society, 1842–9), vii, 343; A. Simson, *Christes testament unfolded* (Edinburgh, 1620), 74; Dr. Balcanquals letters from the synod of Dort (London, 1659), 7.


18. R. Rollock, *Lectures upon the first and second epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians* (Edinburgh, 1606), 240; J. Baillie, *Spiritual marriage: or, the union betweene Christ and his church* (London, 1627), 45.


22. R. Wodrow, *Collections upon the Lives of the Reformers and most eminent Ministers of the Church of Scotland*, (2 vols, Maitland Club, 1834–48), ii/1, 101, emphasis added.


25. Lindsay, *Godly mans journey*, 602.


27. Scottish Record Office, CH 12/18/6, John Forbes of Corse, *Diary*, 4.

28. A. Hume (Edinburgh), *A deduction of the true and catholik meaning of our Saviour his words, this is my bodie* (Edinburgh, 1602), A3r-v; (John Murray), *A dialogue betwixt Cosmophilus and Theophilus anent the urging

29. D. Dickson, A short explanation of the epistle of Paul to the Hebrews (Aberdeen, 1635), 274.

30. (George Gillespie), A dispute against the English-popish ceremonies, obstructed upon the church of Scotland (n.p. 1637), Cir.

31. Lindsay, Godly mans journey, 347; Wariston's Diary, 144, 248.

32. Lindsay, Godly mans journey, 585.


34. Abernethy, Christian and heavenly treatise, 444.

35. Calderwood, Pastor and prelate, 37.


38. Rutherford, Quaint Sermons, 67.


41. Melville, Spirituall propine, 18; Rutherford, Quaint Sermons, 164.


49. Wariston’s Diary, 384–5, 393. See also J. Gordon, History of Scots Affairs, from 1637 to 1641, (3 vols, Spalding Club, 1841), i, 131–2.


51. W. Guild, A compend of the controversies of religion (Edinburgh, 1627), 90; Weemes, Portraiture, 281; Simson, Christes testament, 89; Collections upon the Lives of the Reformers and Most Eminent Ministers of the Church of Scotland [Biog. Collins] (2 vols, Maitland Club, 1834–48), ii/1, 152; Select Biographies, i, 334; D. C. MacNicol, Master Robert Bruce: Minister in the Kirk of Edinburgh (Edinburgh, 1907), 244; D. Dalrymple, Memorials and Letters relating to the History of Britain in the Reign of Charles the First, 2nd edition (2 vols, Glasgow, 1766), ii, 75.


53. Wariston’s Diary, 10, 28 & 200.

54. Rollock, Works, i, pp. lxxxi-lxxxi; Marshall, Virgins and Viragos, 65. See also I & K. Whyte in this volume.


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57. Patrick Adair, A True Narrative of the Rise and Progress of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (1623–1670), ed. W. D. Killen (Belfast, 1866), 38.


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