


Evans's and Cheevers's Quaker Missionary Travels

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**Abstract:** In her article "Evans's and Cheevers's Quaker Missionary Travels" Hui-chu Yu investigates Katharine Evans's and Sarah Cheevers's account of their experiences as Quaker missionaries in Malta between 1658-1662. For Evans and Cheevers traveling was a mission ordained by god and thus their journey is less a trip for the gratification of exploration than spiritual and physical trials. With a purpose to spread Quaker texts, Evans and Cheevers traveled to different lands such as Ireland and Malta. Although they perceived the hostility toward their belief, they still claimed to be god's handmaids with an aim to preach their religious belief. Their attempt to challenge the belief of a society — an act that involves the transformation of a people's mentality — inevitably caused cultural tension.

**Hui-chu YU**

### **Evans's and Cheevers's Quaker Missionary Travels**

Members of the Quaker Religious Society of Friends, Katharine Evans (1618-1692) and Sarah Cheevers (1608-1664) were determined to be missionaries. Despite hostility towards the Quakers, Evans and Cheevers still chose to journey to different lands such as Ireland, Scotland, and England to spread their beliefs and Quaker texts. When they set to Alexandria in 1658, they landed accidentally in Malta, a land still under the governance of the Roman Catholic Church. As a consequence, they were held captives and detained in prison for three and a half years. During their incarceration they underwent interrogations and suffering from physical and mental tortures. With an aim to preach their religious belief to those who had different faith, they claimed to be god's handmaids and aimed at challenging, as missionaries, the religious beliefs of people other than Christians. In the article at hand I investigate Evans's and Cheever's account and related correspondence which illustrate their experiences in Malta between 1658 and 1662 (see *A Short Relation* [1662] and *A True Account* [2003]). Apart from revealing their observations and perception of the other religious mindset, these texts are expressions of their religious beliefs through confrontation with Catholic doctrines and through the resistance they encountered.

In the age of exploration, the accounts of explorers, travelers, and missionaries satisfied the reader's curiosity about the newly discovered worlds and gradually took the place of religious pilgrims to become "the main source of knowledge about distant lands" (Debusmann and Ludwig 65). The new forms of travel literature make manifest the travelogue writers' ways of understanding other cultures from various perspectives. Scott D. Juall points out that "religious affiliation ... is a particularly important focus of early modern travel writers because it is inextricably enmeshed with politics" (2). The spread of Christianity in other continents usually followed the footsteps of the colonizing superpowers and some writers of travel accounts, therefore, tended to judge the people and cultures of certain colonies on the basis of conversion to the dominant European religion. If the colonized people accepted it readily, then the travelogue writers would attribute to the Aboriginal peoples better qualities; otherwise, they were often degraded as uncivilized barbarians unsusceptible to a better culture. Such a mentality displays that the writers regarded the European colonizers as conquerors bringing the colonized people "good government and religion" (Debusmann and Ludwig 66). In other words, they often wrote travel accounts from the political and religious perspectives of conquerors.

In contrast to the buoyant description of the success of Catholicism, missionary accounts of the Quakers are more about the suffering of the itinerant preachers from the perspective of the persecuted. Although some missionary journeys, like George Fox's to North America, were successful in establishing the Quaker organizational structure among colonial Friends, most Quaker ministers still faced discrimination and persecution in US-America and elsewhere (Larson 31). Since Quakers believed that the inward light was a superior guiding spirit to any secular government or ecclesiastical authorities, they took it a violation of conscience to take an oath. They were consequently seen as a seditious power that encouraged resistance or rebellion against the ruling powers (see Kegl 58). Subsequently, several laws were passed in the 1660s to regulate the activities of Quakers. The Quaker Act of 1662 was a regulation to ensure the Oath of Allegiance to king and country, while the Conventicle Act of 1664 and of 1670 were means to discourage the assemblies of nonconformist sects. The pressing atmosphere at home forced Quakers to seek more opportunities preaching overseas. Facing exclusion, Quaker preachers often compared themselves to the Israelites, who were wandering around to look for the Promised Land where they could enjoy an abundant life and spiritual freedom. In this sense, Quaker missionary activities were a sort of diaspora in quest for dreamlands.

As religious minorities, Quaker missionaries preaching the gospel confronted antagonism and persecution in various forms in their homelands, as well as foreign lands. According to Elizabeth Hooton (1660-1672), the first Quaker woman preacher, Quakers visiting the U.S. were often treated as "vagabond rogues" to whom none, except the Indians, would show some compassion (Hooton qtd. in Manners 45). In her memoir, Hooton depicted in detail how unfriendly the English settlers were to a Quaker traveling minister: "The people violently flew upon me young and old, and flung me down on the ground. So I said this was the fruit of their ministry, and the laws I did deny and being contrary to

the law of God and the King and one of their magistrates had said to me ... the next time I came I was to be hanged, such a law had they now made" (70). Hooton's account reveals that Quaker preachers who sought for a haven for religious freedom abroad were often under threat because of their insistence on individual obedience to the Inner Light. Owing to ideological tension, many Quaker accounts of missionary travels focus on the vehement resistance the preachers experienced.

Quaker missionary journeys in the early modern period were different from conventional religious pilgrimages. For pilgrims, the primary purpose to visit famous shrines and holy relics was to strengthen their faith through the experience of the eyewitness. In contrast, Quaker itinerant ministers sought to reinforce the connection between the Quakers in England and those in the colonies and other territories. A more important mission was to attract "the unchurched" and satisfy "the spiritual needs of those who were nominal members or unhappy with other churches" (Barbour and Frost 56). Therefore, Quaker missionaries were not afraid of going into "spiritual wilderness" because they were convinced that they were under the guidance of god and it was sinful to disobey god's will. These preachers did not regard persecution as unbearable but sanctified witness to their faith. In "Another Letter from Sarah Cheevers, to friends in Ireland, to be read among the assemblies of Saints in Light," Cheevers lays bare the significance of ministry: "O ye holy Assemblies! Whose hearts are wholly joined to the Lord. I with you, in the Life & Power of the Almighty God do travel for the raising of the Seed, & the gathering in of the lost sheep of the House of Israel! Oh! Blessed be the day wherein the Lord called me, and counted me worthy to suffer for the Seed's sake" (897). Evans and Cheevers traveled for the sake of converting more souls in doubt of god and his power. To achieve this aim, they had to reach out in spite of the predicaments they might come across. Again, Cheevers alluded to those non-believers as "the lost sheep of the House of Israel" to address to the urgent need to enlighten the lost souls with the Inner Light (897).

Unlike medieval cloistered nuns who were devoted to monastic devotion, Quaker women missionaries had to seek for active preaching of Gospels to proselytize more souls. In a letter to her husband and children from the Malta, Evans urged her family to respond to "a holy calling" (Evans and Cheevers 863). Likewise, Cheevers assumed some significant roles. First, she recognized herself as "a witness even of the everlasting fountain that hath been opened by the messengers of Christ" and "the Lord's endless love and mercies to [her] soul" (866). Second, she saw herself as the chosen one to serve god and spread her experience of having communion with god, despite her unworthiness. Third, in answer to the divine calling, she was an obedient servant to the living god and undertook the mission to "bear testimony to his holy name" (866). When Evans and Cheevers called themselves "servants of God," they intended to establish a unique connection with god, just as what Christ did.

Despite their situation in Malta which of course made it impossible to preach, Evans and Cheever believed that all the afflictions and miseries were various ways to testify to them god's will and mercy through revelations and visions. If they could "bear the Cross with patience," they "shall wear the Crown with joy ... for it is through the long suffering and patient waiting, the crown of Life and Immortality comes to be obtained" (Evans and Cheever 864). They interpreted suffering in terms of divine bliss, so they were able to transcend their suffering in the temporal world to seek for god's eternal shelter. The status of Evans and Cheevers as chosen to be god's representatives is further explicated by Daniel Baker, their rescuer and publisher. Baker was conscious of the sensitive issue of gender in ministry, so he first worked out a rationale to defend the two women missionaries' legitimacy to preach. Despite their weakness and frailty, women prelates were consigned with the mission to spread the Light of Gospels. Although women are the "weaker vessels" "which [are] not esteemed, but base, contemptible and despised in the eyes of lofty man," they are chosen to be better speakers of god than men are because the latter excel only in secular wisdom and knowledge and puffeth up the fleshly mind that's enmity to God" (Evans and Cheevers 807). To Baker, men are less subtle in perceiving the Truth of God since their secular knowledge has overwhelmed their instinctive perception of divinity. In addition, Baker argued that conventionally women are pinpointed as an embodiment of lustful flesh "in the transgression against the Spirit" so that they are supposed "to be under obedience, and to be in silence, to learn in silence, and to ask her Husband at home" (Evans and Cheevers 807). Challenging the argument, Baker questions the sobriety of the husband who is too disorderly and too drunk to teach his wife. To defend women's right to ministry, Baker proposes a

theory of two husbands. He regards Christ as "the man, the true Husband, the true Lord" because he is the only man who can teach the woman "the Spirit of Grace and Truth that is in the one Seed Christ, in the Male Christ, in the Female" (Evans and Cheevers 807). When women are guided by the Spirit, they are transferred to a higher status beyond the constraint of the law. Further, they will be able to avoid "ungodliness and worldly lusts, but also to live soberly and righteously in this present world" (Evans and Cheevers 808). Nevertheless, such divine capacity is not an innate quality cultivated by themselves, but a gift from god. Baker's rationale releases women from patriarchal authority which deprives them of their right to freedom of expression and ministry.

To Evans and Cheevers, the ministry was similar to servant priesthood because they believed that their preaching was "a form of shared suffering with Christ in the midst of those who suffer" (893). The trying situations they encountered are first highlighted in Baker's epistle to the readers. In Malta, the Papists and Jesuits loyal to the Church of Rome excluded and condemned the "innocent, guiltless, and harmless people of the Lord of Hosts (Quakers)" (815). After long starvation, Evans and Cheevers were offered meat to see if they were willing to be converted in exchange of delicacies. To show their determination, they chose to fast for their belief. They took pains to describe the suffocating environment of the prison cell to show how they resisted the physical temptations offered. The cell was "so hot and so close, that we were fain to rise often out of our bed, and lie down at a chink of their door for air to fetch breath; and with the fire within, and the heat without, our skin was like sheep's Leather, and the hair did fall off our heads, and we did fail often our afflictions and burthens were so great, that when it was day we wished for nights, and when it was night we wished for day; we fought death, but could not find it; We desired to die, but death fled from us. We did eat our bread weeping, and mingled our drink with our tears" (823). The vivid description of the enclosed space demonstrates how their jailers meant to keep the two women preachers in an extremely uncomfortable environment.

The physical torment in a suffocating prison cell connected Evans and Cheevers with Christ through suffering. Evans described her own encounter in vivid details: "my life was smitten, and was in a very great agony, so sweet was as drops of blood, and the righteous one was laid into a Sepulcher, and a great stone was roll'd to the door; but the Prophecie was, that he should arise again the third" (818-19). At this moment, Evans seemed to make it ambiguous whether she was talking about herself or Christ. Her description refers to Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, which bespeaks the transcendental nature of excruciating physical pain Evans and Cheevers underwent and their effort to sacrifice themselves in imitation of Christ. Modeling on the ministry of Jesus Christ was one of their strategies to claim their authority to preach since it is an irrefutable justification of women ministry as a type of service (see Edwards 425). Similar to modern feminist theologians who resist hierarchical domination, Evans and Cheevers succumbed only to god, but not any other form of authoritative power. When they were repeatedly demanded to identify with the Catholic Church, they could always stand firmly on their own ground to critique the Catholic dogma and practice their religion accordingly. Their bravery to withstand the interrogation of the Catholic friar was derived from the belief that they were no servants to any one except their god.

Servitude under their god in turn sanctified Evans and Cheevers so that they ceased to be subject to any constraint of authorities. Both of them identified themselves with "the poor sufferers for the Seed of God, in the Covenant of Light of Life, and Truth" (821). The detailed description of their suffering in their account serves two functions. On the one hand, it shows their willingness to sacrifice for Inner Light: "My Life is given up for the service of the Lord. Bonds, Chains, Bolts, Irons, double doors. Death it self is too little for the Testimony of Jesus, and for the Word of God; so the Seed be gathered, it is but a reasonable Sacrifice: Bonds and Afflictions betide the Gospel of Christ; He that will live godly in Christ Jesus, must suffer Persecution; it is an evident token" (897). The passage demonstrates their readiness and composure to accept depravation and torture. Before they arrived in Malta, they already saw in visions their suffering for preaching the truth and sensed the danger awaiting; however, they still chose to believe that it was god's ordinance to move them for significant suffering and trusted god's deliverance. On the other hand, they portrayed the inhuman treatment they suffered to expose the atrocity of the Catholic friars so as to mirror the marginalization and oppression which the religiously marginalized went through.

Since Evans and Cheevers were detained in prison, they could not portray the physical environment of Malta as other travelers would. Instead, they projected their perception of the land through the theological challenges the friars posed to them. After they arrived in Malta, Evans and Cheevers were brought before the altar of a church and commanded to kneel, but they refused to do so in defiance of idolatry. In one of their letters to Baker, they allude to image worshipping: "the seducing spirits that do cause the people to err, and compel them to worship the beast and his Image, and to have his mark in their foreheads, and in their hands, and to bow to Pictures and painted Walls, and to worship the things of their own hands, and to fall down to that which their own fingers have fashioned, and will not suffer them to look toward Sion upon pain of death, nor to walk towards Jerusalem upon pain of Faggot and Fire, but must abide in Babel, and believe whatsoever they speak or do, to be truth" (Evans and Cheevers 842). Malta also serves as a sharp contrast to where Quakers could enjoy divine bliss. Evans compared where her husband and children were in "a Land of Blessedness, which floweth with Milk and Honey, among the faithful Stewards, whose mouths are opened wide in righteousness, to declare the Eternal Mysteries of the everlasting Kingdom, of the endless joys and eternal glory, whereinto all the willing and obedient shall enter, and be blessed for ever" (Evans and Cheevers 864). While the hometown of Evans was with religious freedom for those who were faithful, Malta in contrast symbolized wilderness. Evans and Cheevers suffered from imprisonment in Malta because of "theological mistrust" (Monga 178) and thus they were motivated to lay bare in their account the inhumanity of the Inquisition and show how uncompromising they were in defending their faith.

Evans and Cheevers responded to suffering stoically because they took obedience a crucial feature of the new covenant with Christ. Unlike the Jesuit friars who claimed to owe obedience to the Catholic Church, Evans and Cheevers insisted on submitting only "to the Government of Christ's Spirit" (818). The stoicism reflects not only their submission to god's calling but also the Quaker's pacifist view. Quakers in the early modern ascribed "nonviolence" to "the will of God" and stuck to the principles of Christ (Weddle 50-51). They denounced violence since what they pursued was liberty of religious conscience rather than dominance over other individuals or institutions. Consequently, when they were intimidated by violent acts, they treated violence as a means to strengthen their belief so that they rarely questioned the existence of god. They did not think of fighting back by themselves because god would deliver them from distress.

In a letter sent by Evans and Cheever to the Pope's Lord Inquisitor in Malta, they challenge Catholicism and insist that "the knowledge of God is Life Eternal" and that only "the Light in the Conscience, the true Teacher of his People" and the Spirit of Truth can help one to break the confinement of an Earthen Vessel ... or an Earthen House and bring the Grace of God that bringeth salvation, that appeareth to all men, and it teacheth all that come to believe in it, and to love, and to be guided by it, to deny all ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to walk soberly, righteously, holy, and godly in this present world" (Evans and Cheevers 850). They managed to distinguish themselves from the friars by stressing on the meaning of true faith as they perceived it. The Jesuits laughed at Evans's and Cheevers's missionary zeal because to them, of course, the two women missionaries were members of a sect (818). With regard to the prestige of the Catholic Church, the friars boasted of the number of Catholics, the spread of Catholicism in many countries, and the long history of Catholicism, as well as the miracles it wrought. They claimed that "None had the true Light but the Catholicks" so that they took it vain and futile for the two women missionaries to "run about to preach" something that could not be accounted as true faith (Evans and Cheevers 818). In turn, Evans and Cheevers protested by defining true faith as "a pure Conscience void of offence towards God and man" in every individual (818) and thus pointed out the fundamental difference between Catholic and Quaker doctrines to defy the friars' derision. For Evans and Cheevers, "Christ Jesus was the Light of the World, and had lighted every one that cometh into the World, which Light is our salvation that do receive it, and the same Light is the World's condemnation that do not believe in it" (852). For the two sufferers, the deliverance of those strayed souls depended on their willingness to let in the inspirational Light, that is, the teaching of Christ, so as to shake off the folly of idolatrous practices.

In the context of the history of symbolism here applied to the theological argumentation by Evans and Cheevers, Rosemary Radford Ruether asserts that "human experience is the starting point and the



ending point of the hermeneutical circle ... Experience mentioned here refers to experience of the divine, experience of oneself, and experience of the community and the world, in an interacting dialect. Received symbols, formulas, and laws are either authenticated or not through their ability to illuminate and interpret experience. Systems of authority try to reverse this relation and make received symbols dictate what can be experienced as well as the interpretation of that which is experienced" (12). Simply put, the experiential way of knowing god enables believers to appeal to their instinctive feelings and transcend the boundary of ecclesiastical knowledge. Thus, when accounting their journey to Malta, it is less important for Evans and Cheevers to describe Malta as an exotic city than transmitting to others their own experience: "breakthrough experiences beyond ordinary fragmented consciousness than provide interpretive symbols illuminating the means of the whole of life. Since consciousness is ultimately individual, we postulate that revelation always starts with an individual. In earlier societies in which there was much less sense of individualism this breakthrough experience may have been so immediately mediated through a group of interpreters to the social collective that the name of the individual is lost. Later, the creative individual stands out as Prophet, Teacher, Revealer, Savior, or Fonder of the religious tradition" (13).

When preaching to a Catholic community, Evans and Cheevers suffered obstruction and exclusion because they were trying to impose individual revelatory experience to a crowd that was in their opinion beyond divine experience. To them, Quaker belief recognized the crucial part individual consciousness plays, whereas in Catholicism tradition preceded individuals. In this case, it was difficult for the Catholics to perceive the Inner Light Evans and Cheevers were trying to transmit to them. Owing to the lack of similar revelatory experiences, the friars supervising the Maltese prison could not understand what Evans and Cheevers had witnessed: their case shows the obstacle to mediate revelatory experience which is experienced on an individual level. Thus, the social significance of revelatory experiences should not be underestimated and suggests the relevance of Evans's and Cheevers's perceived beliefs: "the revelatory experience becomes socially meaningful only when translated into communal consciousness. This means, first, that the revelatory experience must be collectively appropriated by a formative group, which in turn promulgates and teaches a history to the community. Second, the formative group mediates what is unique in the revelatory experience through/past cultural symbols and traditions" (Ruether 13-14). The mediation of such a spiritual experience inexorably involves the process of coercing the nonbelievers into conforming to the Quaker beliefs.

Confronting people who did not share the same revelatory experience, Evans and Cheevers were doomed to grapple with skepticism and derision with regard to what they believed was legitimate. Their missionary experience in Malta thus demonstrates the existence of "the irresolute relationship between self and Other ... which result[s] from transforming conceptions and attributions of alterity in the sphere of religion" (Juell 1). The ideological otherness made the two women strangers in the alien land, as well as daring challengers to the Catholic Church and the tradition and practices it represented. Although detained in prison, Evans and Cheevers still managed to keep themselves free in their beliefs: when the friars commanded them to work as St. Paul did in Rome, they asked for the same working conditions — working under a heathen king, in their own hired house, with anyone who would come to them, and teaching them in the name of the Lord Jesus (851). This proved to be an effective strategy of counter argumentation. And Evans and Cheevers knitted stockings, made garments, and mended clothes for the poor prisoners free of charge. They worked not to gain profit, but to put their god's spirit of charity into practice.

Writing was another way for Evans and Cheevers to resist the Catholics. Kate Peters, in *Print Culture and the Early Quakers*, explains how published accounts and tracts helped with itinerant ministry and shows "the interdependence of the spoken and written word" (61). Likewise, R. Warburton argues that "both writerly and spiritual authority are intimately linked to early modern understandings of female authorship and self-representation" (403). By means of recounting their sufferings, the two missionaries made themselves "potential sites and forms of collective resistance to the dominant culture" (Peters 65). They recounted their experiences and had them read to other Quakers in the assemblies and in this way they asserted their actions as god's representatives through writing. Further, Evans and Cheevers illustrated their visionary experiences in the prison of Malta to

claim their authority to preach their faith. The friars often challenged their authority by defying their faith as false thus denying them redemption unless they convert to Catholicism. To defend their legitimacy to preach, Evans and Cheevers often appealed to god's vision that appeared in front of them at critical moments. Cheevers proclaimed that "the brightness of his appearing" was the "manifestation of his Love, Light, Love and Spirit of Christ Jesus ... to put an end to sin and Satan, and bring to light Immortality through the preaching of the everlasting Gospel by the Spirit of Prophecie" (866). In another vision, they heard the Lord telling them not to grieve, "though Israel be not gathered; the seed of Malta shall be as the stars of the skie for multitude: That which ye have sown, shall not die, but live" (853).

Unlike the friars who tried to establish their connection with god through the Bible, Evans and Cheevers kept emphasizing their spiritual affiliation with god. Time after time, they manifested that their corporeal existence would be as meaningless as death if god did not resurrect them "by the living Word of his Grace" and by sanctifying them "through soul and spirit" (844). They argued that despite their gender, they were not less worthy since god had purified them thoroughly by his grace so that they could face all sorts of persecutions unflinchingly. They believed that god worked a miracle in them: "the Lord did take away all fear from us, and multiplied our strength, and gave us power and boldness to plead for the truth of the Lord Jesus, and Wisdom of Words to stop the mouths of the gain-sayers, that they would be made to say we spake truth, they could never say otherwise" (888).

Evans's minute accounts of her encounters in Malta are tinged with religious fervor so that the city under the governance of the Catholic Church is represented more metaphorically than physically. Right before Evans set off for Malta with Cheevers, she knew that it was going to be a difficult journey in a land full of "afflictions and miseries"; nevertheless, she still undertook the mission because it was her "Eternal Father's Will to prove [God's mercy in her]" (864). Evans compared her homeland to the Promised Land blessed by eternal divine grace, while such a description might be also a way to insinuate Malta as a place void of physical enjoyment, righteousness, and eternal glory. When describing the "non-Christian" world they were in, they chose to portray it as a world "where the swelling Seas, nor raging, foaming Waves, nor stormy winds, though they beat vehemently, cannot be able to remove [them]" (865).

In conclusion, Evans's and Cheever's correspondences to account their experience in Malta project different perceptions of where they were from and Malta, a land governed by the Catholic Church. In their account, Malta was just like the enclosed cell they were in — gloomy and suffocating because of the superstitious beliefs the Maltese had. As a result, the cell epitomized the Malta without the grace of god, while they were just like torch-bearers who bring light to the miserable place. Evans's and Cheevers's travel account shows that they gained autonomy in the Maltese prison both through writing and spiritual connection with their god. Their account turned out to be a means to contact the outside world, a means to manifest their belief through lived experience. Their writing about the persecutions they underwent also served as a means to solidify union among Quakers and eventually established the two women preachers' autonomy to speak and to preach to their readers in full authority.

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