John Knox and womankind: a reappraisal

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> To promote a woman to bear rule, superiority, dominion or empire above any realm, nation, or city is repugnant to nature, contumely to God, a thing most contrarious to his revealed will and approved ordinance, and finally it is the subversion of good order, and all equity and justice.
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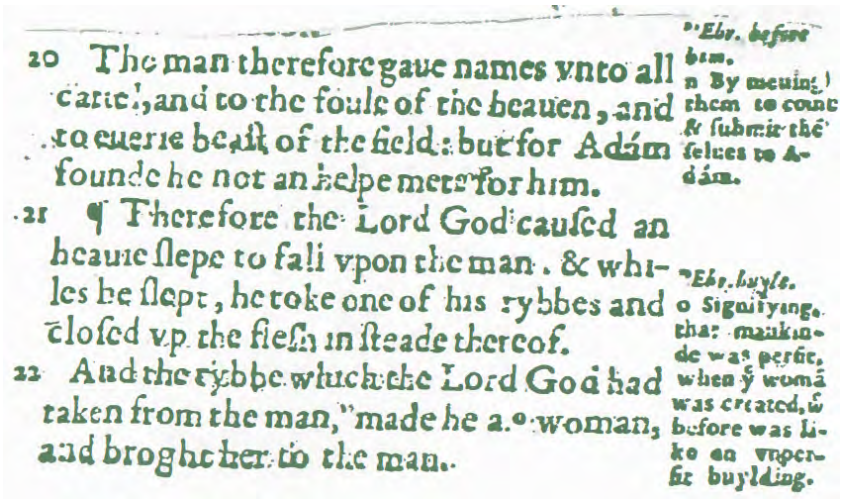
> John Knox, *The first blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women*, 1558.

John Knox's infamous remarks about the 'monstrous regiment' are frequently repeated in modern day media, but few people today realise that the target of his wrath was not womenkind in general.[1] To call all sixteenth-century women, or any women for that matter, a 'monstrous regiment' is to portray them in entirely the wrong light. When John Knox was writing his notorious *First Blast* his intended targets were the powerful ruling Catholic queens of mid-sixteenth century Britain and Europe who were thwarting the spread of Calvinism. Therefore his intended targets were Mary of Guise, Governor of Scotland, Catherine de Médicis, shortly to become Regent of France and especially Mary Tudor, Queen Regnant of England.[2] 'Regiment' simply means rule and Knox's 'monstrous regiment' were these powerful Catholic queens of the mid-sixteenth century. There had perhaps never been quite so many women in charge at the same time in European history and it was just too much for Knox to bear!

In 1558 he had been living in Geneva where he was a leading Calvinist reformer. Knox would therefore have objected to anyone, male or female, who hindered the progress of the Protestant Reformation. However, when these obstacles collectively were ruling women he felt obliged to lash out in print. Knox's zeal was quickly undermined, however, for in between writing and publishing the *First Blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women* Mary Tudor died. This was a classic case of bad timing in the publishing world for now that his *bête noire* had gone, Mary's sister and successor Elizabeth Tudor took great offence at his book. Elizabeth would not directly attack Knox, but she used subtle means to annoy him such as barring him from entering England to travel back to Scotland in 1559. Knox wrote that 'my First Blast hath blown me from all my friends in England' for, although published anonymously, everyone knew it was he who had written this tract. To be fair, Knox's opinions were not original for he was merely reiterating contemporary opinion against female rulers, put forward by reforming clerics such as Christopher Goodman. None the less Knox's timing of the *First Blast* proved to be catastrophic. The ferocity of its text caused his supporters much embarrassment in Geneva, Scotland, France and England. Moreover it cost him vital support during a particularly difficult phase of the Reformation. The last person Knox would have wanted to antagonise at this time was the ostensibly Protestant Queen Elizabeth of England, yet this was precisely what he did do.

It is perhaps a misfortune of publishing history that Knox's slightly more balanced *Second Blast* and *Third Blast*, which criticised tyrannous leaders regardless of their gender, were never printed. His targets here were monarchs 'unworthy of regiment above the people of God.' One thing is very clear in all this – Knox never intended to denigrate ordinary women. He knew and respected the place that women held within the patriarchal Protestant family. This may well have been subservient to the place of the husband, but it was often the mother who gave children their primary religious instruction. Women therefore served as a role model for their children's future religious practice. Knox also believed that men and women were



20 The man therefore gaue names vnto all cattel, and to the foule of the heauen, and to euerie beast of the field: but for Adám founde he not an helpe meet for him.
21 ¶ Therefore the Lord God caused an heauie slepe to fall vpon the man. & whiles he slept, he toke one of his rybbes and closed vp the flesh in steade thereof.
22 And the rybbe which the Lord God had taken from the man, made he a woman, and broght her to the man.

a Ebr. before him.
n By meaning them to come & submit themselues to Adám.
o Ebr. buyld.
o Signifying, that mankinde was perfit, when ỹ woma was created, & before was like an vnperfit buylding.

1560 Geneva translation of the Bible, Genesis, Ch,.3, v.21-22.

equal before God, if not in law or custom. Knox always admired women who helped him with his work, yet still knew their place in the patriarchal order. Furthermore, his notoriety for ferocious preaching and harangues against Mary Queen of Scots present an unbalanced view of Knox and women, for in reality Knox was not a mysogynist.

In his private life Knox would love two wives and father at least two sons and three daughters. His first wife was Margery Bowes of the Yorkshire/Durham gentry family, whom he met whilst exiled in England in the early 1550s. Knox first knew her mother, Elizabeth Bowes, as she had become strongly attached to the Protestant cause and regarded Knox as her spiritual mentor. Elizabeth offered the exiled Scot hospitality at her Alnwick home when he was travelling between preaching engagements in Berwick-upon-Tweed and Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Like many women caught up in the Reformation struggles, Elizabeth was in spiritual confusion at this time and Knox helped her decide to take a Protestant path away from her Catholic family. It was, after all, a path he had taken himself when he abandoned the priesthood. When apart they corresponded in most affectionate and godly terms, Elizabeth Bowes was addressed firstly as a 'sister', but after he became unofficially engaged to Margery in January 1553, Knox called her his 'deirlie belovit Mother'. Margery was his 'deirlie belovit sister' until she became his wife. Both Margery Bowes and her mother Elizabeth were persuaded by Knox to leave the North East of England for Geneva. This city had become a sanctuary for English and Scottish Protestant exiles respectively during the reign of Mary Tudor and the regency of Mary of Guise. Knox knew that he could protect them there, but Elizabeth Bowes's decision to leave could not have been easy. She had consciously challenged patriarchal custom by leaving her Catholic husband Richard, a long-serving Anglo-Scottish Border officer, to be with Knox's 'faithful' in Geneva. Knox's opponents accused Elizabeth of being his mistress, but this was unlikely as Knox was nine years younger than her and, as a merchant's son, her social inferior. The only thing he may have been tempted to do was hug her when Elizabeth was distressed as they stood 'at the copbourd in Anwik'.

Richard Bowes, on the other hand, would have been rightfully aggrieved that his wife of thirty years had abandoned him and their other fourteen children to follow a Protestant preacher to a foreign city. Margery was happy to accompany her mother and fiancé, as her father would not have allowed her to marry Knox in England. Elizabeth and Margery's actions defied all the patriarchal conventions of the period, for under English Common Law both women were the property of Richard and should have obeyed his wishes. Knox, however, had no objections to their unconventional behaviour as he saw their actions as 'godly' and he had little sympathy for the Catholic Richard Bowes's predicament. Knox and Margery were married in Geneva in 1555, which probably gave his enemies less ammunition to accuse him of sexual impropriety. In truth, Knox liked having female helpers around him, whom he regarded as his spiritual equals. This was why he was prepared to sanction the journey of Elizabeth and Margery, and others, to Geneva to continue doing God's work. His correspondence with women was always affectionate and godly, but what their husbands had to say in return is unrecorded. Poor Mr Bowes died in 1558 with his wife still in Geneva and, significantly, he made no mention of her in his will.[3]

Anne Lock was another famous Knox 'groupie', who left her husband in London to be with him in Geneva. Knox's letters to Anne have survived and they are always tender. She was always his dearest sister and, no matter how busy he was with important matters such as starting the Scottish Reformation, he always found time to answer her specific questions about the Bible and its interpretation. It was to Anne that he poured his heart out when England turned its back on him for publication of the *First Blast*. Spiritually at least, Anne was the woman who got closest to Knox's

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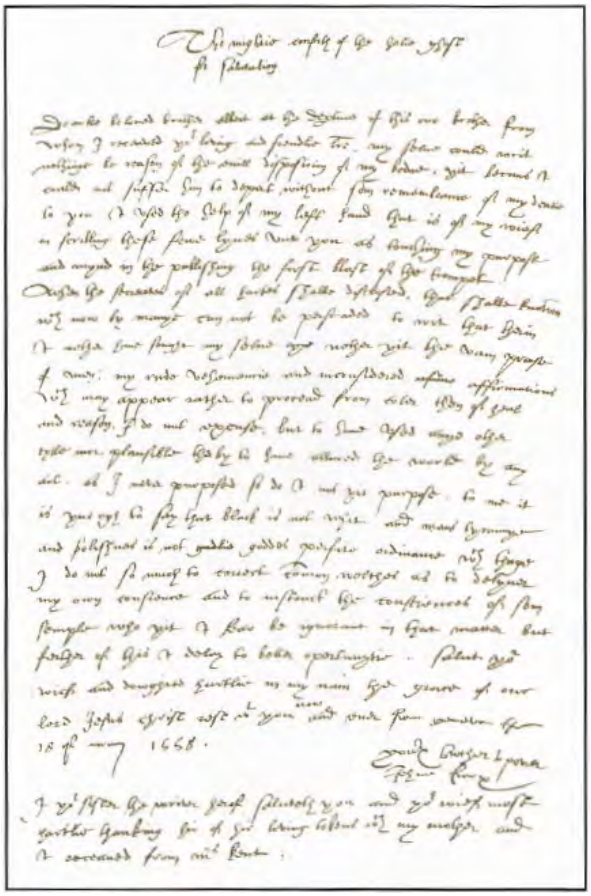
soul and he was happy to let her be that close. He therefore appears to have been able to relate to women's spiritual needs, perhaps more than that of his male followers. Writing from Geneva during 1556 Knox freely admitted to Anne that he had a 'thrist and langoure... for your presence.' His next letter asked her 'to gyd and conduct your self to this place' despite her husband's opposition and the fact that Knox was recently married himself. On 8 May 1557 Anne arrived in Geneva with her two small children and maidservant, but significantly without Mr Lock. Knox had painted Geneva as the 'maist perfyt schoole of Chryst that ever was in the erth' – so how could she resist this Protestant paradise in comparison to Mary Tudor's perceived reign of terror in England? Anne set about translating the works of Calvin into English but, after Knox left Geneva to go to Scotland, she too returned – but in this instance to her husband in London. Their correspondence fades out in 1562 but, when Anne was widowed in 1571, her husband left her all his goods. Anne remarried firstly the preacher Edward Dering, and upon being widowed for a second time she wed Richard Prowse, a merchant of Exeter. She continued to support Scottish ministers when they visited London in the later sixteenth century. Sadly we have no portrait of Anne to see a likeness of the woman who held such a special place in the affections of Scotland's most famous churchman.[4]

Knox trusted his wife implicitly and even allowed her to write letters on his behalf to other notable reformers, such as John Foxe on 18 May 1558. Foxe had castigated him for publishing the *First Blast* and in his dictated reply Knox let Margery refer to his inexcusable 'rude vehemencie and inconsidered affirmations'. Although Knox signed the letter, a footnote by Margery affirms her 'as the writer hereof' and she sent greetings to Foxe's wife and mother-in-law. As an Englishwoman, Margery knew how vital support for the Scottish Reformation would be from the new Queen Elizabeth I. She was dutifully trying to help her husband out of the hole he had dug for himself. She returned to Scotland with Knox in 1559 and he must have been devastated when Margery died in Edinburgh during the autumn of 1560. Her mother remained in contact with Knox and his family. Elizabeth even came to Edinburgh to look after him and her grandchildren and may have stayed in Knox's household until she died in 1568. Knox wrote a warm eulogy for Elizabeth as she had been with him since her first days of Protestantism in the earlier 1550s.

Elizabeth had presumably not opposed Knox's remarriage in 1564 to Margaret Stewart, daughter of the staunchly Protestant Andrew Stewart, Lord Ochiltree. Knox certainly recognised and admired godly women, but Margaret was a mere sixteen years of age when she married the fifty-eight-year-old minister! A wife who was forty-two years the junior of her husband would raise eyebrows today, but considering that life expectancy was only around forty years of age in the sixteenth century this was a phenomenal age gap. Surprisingly few commented on the disparity in their ages, as Margaret was from a staunchly Protestant family and it was seen to be a godly marriage alliance. It was neither a platonic marriage, nor a marriage of convenience, for Knox fathered three

more children before his death in 1572. Some sneered that Knox had remarried a lady well above his status, but this did not bother either party. As far as Margaret was concerned, she had married the hero of the Scottish Reformation. After his death she remarried the fervently Protestant Border laird, Sir Andrew Ker of Faldonside, in 1574. Margaret had more children by him and died in 1611, having witnessed many dramatic decades of Scottish history.



Facsimile of a letter from John Knox (written by his wife) to Mr Foxe.

Mary Queen of Scots did, however, comment on Knox's second marriage. She apparently voiced angry words about a Stewart, of the same blood as her own, marrying the man she regarded as her *bête noire*. Knox assuredly loved women, but Mary wasn't a woman in his eyes. She was a female Catholic monarch and as such was a continuation of the 'monstrous regiment' he had railed against back in 1558. When the widowed Mary returned to Scotland from France in 1561, Knox was one of only a handful of Scots who did not celebrate the occasion. Mary's arrival at Leith aboard a French galley gave Knox an unpleasant reminder of his years as a French galley slave in the late 1540s. His greatest fear was that she might, like her late mother or mother-in-law, fight the establishment of his beloved Protestantism. From the first Sunday after Mary's arrival, Knox stirred up trouble for her. He orchestrated a riot as she went to mass in the chapel at Holyrood House and delivered vitriolic sermons about her faith to his Edinburgh congregation.

This battle of words moved on to verbal confrontations between Knox and Mary. Although these are well-known encounters, much hyped by Mary's apologists, there were few witnesses to their debates. We only have Knox's version of events to go by, which are clearly biased against this queen. Nevertheless as a Scot, Knox had as much right as any other to make a personal approach to his monarch. The Scottish Court was, after all, far more open than the English court of this period. He also believed that monarchs were subject to God's authority, which could not be overruled. His initial audience with Mary in 1561 – recorded in Knox's *History of the Reformation in Scotland* – began with what can only be described as a plea for academic freedom.

> Please your Majesty (said he) that learned men in all ages have had their judgements free... from the common judgement of the world; such also have they published, both with pen and tongue, and yet notwithstanding they themselves have lived in the common society with others, and have borne patiently with the errors and imperfections which they could not amend.

Mary may have seen the religious contradiction in this, as she wanted freedom to worship as she pleased, but Knox had the *First Blast* on his mind and he continued:

> If the Realm finds no inconvenience from the regiment of a woman, that which they approve I shall not disallow... but shall be content to live under your Grace, as Paul was to live under Nero and my hope is that, so long as you defile not your hands with the blood of the saints of God, that neither I nor that Book shall either hurt you or your authority; for in very deed Madame, that Book was written most especially against that wicked Jezebel of England [*i.e.* Mary Tudor].

If by this roundabout apology Knox was hoping for Mary's conversion to Protestantism, he would be disappointed. Mary was resolutely Catholic until her death. Once she locked horns with Knox, they could never be reconciled. Mary did however ask Knox if the 'monstrous regiment' referred to women in general, to which he replied that this particular question had never been considered in public or in secret. 'If I had intended to have troubled your estate because you are a woman, I might have chosen a time more convenient for that purpose than now... when your own presence is within the realm.' He probably gave much the same answer to supporters of Elizabeth I, but he would never escape from his *First Blast's* slur against female rulers. How could he satisfactorily denounce Mary Queen of Scots whilst looking to Queen Elizabeth I for English support during the Scottish Reformation?

Academics debated the issues raised by Knox's pamphlet and, though none of them denied the existence of patriarchy, opponents skilfully defended the natural and

God-given right of royal women to rule where there was no direct male heir. This issue is still debated today, but in the mid sixteenth century the most obvious reply to Knox's *First Blast* was John Aylmer's *An Harborow for Faithful and Trewe Subjectes* (1559). Aylmer, conscious that Knox had argued that female rule was against nature, stated that:

> If it were unnatural for a woman to rule because she lacketh a man's strength, then old kings which be most meet to rule for wit and experience, because they lack strength, should be unmeet for the feebleness of the body.

True to the patriarchal norms of this period, Aylmer accepted that a married queen 'must be a subject' to her husband, 'but as a magistrate she may be her husband's head'. In other words, female rulers were to be treated as honorary men when it came to ruling over their subjects and Elizabeth would famously remind her subjects in 1588 that she 'had the heart and stomach of a king'. However back in the late 1550s and 1560s many expected Elizabeth I to marry and thereafter show obedience to her husband as a dutiful wife in all things except matters of state. Subsequent history has shown that Elizabeth was well aware of this conundrum and maintained her power by remaining single. That Mary Queen of Scots' second and third marriages proved to be her regal undoing only enhances Elizabeth's shrewdness.

Knox's behaviour towards ordinary women appears equally paradoxical, for surely he would not have allowed his wives Margery, or Margaret, to leave him and their children to follow another Calvinist reformer? Had they threatened to do so, Knox would probably have been as angry as Richard Bowes and thus not as understanding as Mr Lock. He would no doubt have delivered stern lectures to Margery, or Margaret, on their wifely duties. Yet Knox had himself pushed the patriarchal boundaries of early modern society in letting married women leave their husbands to become his followers under a smokescreen of 'godliness'. These women would have been aware that there was no shortage of opinionated men in the mid sixteenth century ready to tell them how they should behave. These men did not have to look far for inspiration as the Bible and ancient philosophers like Aristotle reinforced the inferiority of womankind. For example, St Paul's letters to the Ephesians would probably have been quoted by the literate to married women who did obey their husbands. These letters ordered wives to 'submit yourselves unto your own husbands as unto the Lord' and they were always to acknowledge that 'the husband is the head of the wife'. However, it is clear that John Knox was aware that St Paul also instructed husbands to 'love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave himself for it'.

In secular society the sixteenth century was an era of pronounced double standards, which always favoured men over women. It followed that it was acceptable for men to be drunk in public, but not so women. Women were to be chaste at marriage and faithful thereafter, but this was not a requirement for the bridegroom. In England women were the property of their fathers before marriage, and they belonged to their husbands after marriage. Only a widow was truly free of male domination, but she was in an unenviable situation. If she was poor and did not remarry, the widow was seen as a burden on her parish poor fund. However, if she did remarry, she could be accused of being unfaithful to her late husband's memory. The sixteenth century can therefore be seen as a man's world, but surely if all women behaved exactly as men wanted there would have been no need for husbands to preach to their wives?

Quoting the Bible at your wife would be regarded as being eccentric behaviour today and might even end up in divorce proceedings. However, there was no divorce in sixteenth-century England and very little divorce in Scotland, so the majority of marriages ended with the death of either partner. No woman could get away from the very first book of the Old Testament – Genesis – and what it had to say about Adam and Eve in Paradise. The Bible had a far more central role to play in the lives of everyday men and women in the sixteenth century and could be read literally. Adam came first, Eve came second, which quite simply is the origin of prejudice against women and all subsequent gender inequality. Nevertheless, where St Paul is very direct, Genesis could be open to contemporary interpretation. The 1560 Geneva translation of the Bible, dedicated to Queen Elizabeth I, would have been known to Knox and his followers. If one looks carefully at Genesis, chapter two, verses 21-22, in the Geneva edition there is an interesting marginal comment. After describing how 'woman' was created from Adam's rib, the margin states that this was 'signifying that mankinde was perfit when the woman was created, which before was like an unperfect buylding'. This was undoubtedly inserted to flatter a queen regnant, but it had an interesting impact upon literate women for the Geneva Bible was widely read until well into the seventeenth century.

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The 1611 King James Bible, which is more familiar today, did not become the standard Bible until many years after its publication. As the translators of the new authorised version were working for a king,

John Knox, Returning Home After Having Preached His Last Sermon. Circa 1800s

James VI & I, there is naturally no mention of man's imperfections before woman came along beside verses 21 and 22 of Genesis, chapter three. This change of emphasis was part of the male backlash against women after the death of Elizabeth in 1603. For although the status of women in society had been under attack throughout the sixteenth century, few dared to say anything openly when there were powerful queens regnant of England. For example, in sixteenth-century England female heiresses were being squeezed out of their inheritances by discreet male-only entail of landed estates. However, men who dared to speak out against female rule could be accused of treason as Elizabeth was always ultrasensitive about her rights to the English throne. Knox was truly fortunate to be both a Scot and out of England in 1558, for had he been there he could have been executed for treasonable assertions in *The First Blast*.

Still, as the examples of Elizabeth Bowes and Anne Locke demonstrate, Knox did not mislike women. In truth he had a soft spot for women and was a loving father and husband who never intended to challenge all of womankind in the *First Blast*. It was just Catholic queens who angered him and frankly their numbers could be counted on the fingers of one hand. There were millions of other women living in the mid sixteenth century that Knox never intended to denigrate. The all too frequent mention of women as a 'monstrous regiment' is in truth a monstrous misquote.

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Statue of John Knox at the High Kirk of St Giles, Edinburgh