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Panel: **Fashioning Resistance** Chair: Johanna Amos Email: j.amos@queensu.ca

As “a hedge, as a convenience, a good thing”: Elizabeth Petipher Cash’s continued fashioning of a Plain appearance

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[Front slide]

From the 1670s, British members of the non-conformist Protestant religion, The Religious Society of Friends, better known as Quakers, developed a style of dress to mark out its members. It was striking for its simplicity and termed Plain, or sometimes ‘peculiar’. It was added to their customs, and ultimately formalised in their guidance or Testimonies, as the Testimony of Plainness.¹

[Slide 2: Rowntree Quote]

Many conservative Quakers viewed the practise of what became known as Plain dressing as “a hedge, as a convenience, a good thing – the clergyman of the parish then knew who were Friends and expected certain things of them.”²

[Slide 3: Elizabeth Petipher Cash]

This paper will examine the continued use of Plain dress by one British woman, Elizabeth Petipher Cash. As we shall see, she used her own sartorial choices to resist both fashionable clothing developments in wider British Society, as well as the sartorial developments being encouraged by progressive factions in her own religious community. This research is based around my examination of her surviving garments, held at Killerton House National Trust in Devon, England, alongside her surviving writings and photographic portraits.

Pierre Bordieu alongside Petr Bogatyrev’s theories will serve as a useful framework. Their writings illustrate how traditional and fashionable dress have historically been treated as opposing forces.³ Such a notion of opposition was equally at play in Plain Quaker communities.

Quaker Dress

[Slide 4: Quaker Plain Dress]

The conventions of Plain Quaker dress were notably enduring. By the early nineteenth century, visible conventions existed within the attire favoured by Plain Quaker women, bordering on a uniform appearance. Women Friends typically wore full-length high-necked gowns with gathered skirts and

¹ J. William Frost, "Changing Quaker Ideals for Material Culture," Quaker Aesthetics. Reflections on a Quaker Ethic in American Design and Consumption (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) 17.

² John Stevenson Rowntree, *Account of the 1859 Yearly Meeting*. 1859. Archive of the Religious Society of Friends, London.

³ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Peasant and his Body," 1962. Re-printed in *Ethnography*, 5. 4. (2004): 579-600 and Petr Bogatyrev, *The Functions of Folk Costume in Moravian Slovakia*. Translated from Slovak by Richard. G. Crum, (Re-printed The Hague & Paris: Mouton, [1937] 1971)

modest petticoats; large plain shawls and tall, silk poke bonnets with wide ribbons tied under the chin.⁴

Contrasting white linen or cotton accessories were also important, and examples frequently survive in dress collections: the under-cap, kerchief or handkerchief, apron and cuffs. Whilst the fabrics were typically un-patterned, un-trimmed and of muted or dull shades, Plain Friends did incorporate subtle nods to fashionable cuts and modest versions of fashionable silhouettes. It also became publically acknowledged that despite eschewing trimmings and decoration, Plain Friends were 'famous for the exquisite delicacy of their materials.' While their garments may have been plain, their cloth was invariably of the 'best sort.'⁵

From the early seventeenth century, Plain dress was a disciplinary matter. Overseers in each local community supervised member's conformity to Plain dress. Those deemed to be improperly clothed - too bright, too lavish, too fashionable - were admonished by overseers in the privacy of their own home. Continued inattentiveness to Plain dress could result in disownment – exclusion from the religion's services and ostracism from the Quaker community.⁶

[Slide 5: Quaker Plain Dress]

However, as early as 1836, one British Quaker wrote that the custom of Plain dress was "felt to be a weak point, scarcely susceptible to defence at all..."⁷ And by the 1850s, many Quakers were questioning the use of Plain clothing as a marker of piety. Rapidly falling membership of the religion, in favour of Evangelical Christianity, caused the British Quaker hierarchy, named The London Yearly Meeting, to take a hard look at its practices, especially the high regard it placed on Plain dress.⁸

1861 was a momentous date in the story of Quaker attitudes to dress. It was in this year, that a formal committee of male Quakers made "peculiarity of dress and speech" (or the wearing of Plain dress), optional, to all British Quakers, for the first time since the 1670s. British Quaker men and women were granted individual freedom of choice of their clothing, safe in the knowledge they would not be ostracised for their choices.⁹

While many women, especially of the younger generation, welcomed this development for its opportunity to more closely assimilate them into wider fashionable society; many Quakers, especially of the older generations, continued to resist sartorial change. As the Quaker William Frost acknowledged, despite the amendments to Quaker guidance, conforming to fashion was still 'deemed

⁴ Hannah Rumball, *The Relinquishment of Plain Dress: British Quaker women's abandonment of Plain Quaker attire, 1860 – 1914* (University of Brighton dissertation thesis repository, 2016) 249.

⁵ Frost, "Changing Quaker Ideals for Material Culture," 17.

⁶ Catherine Lavoie, "Eighteenth Century Development of the Meeting House," *Quaker Aesthetics: Reflections on a Quaker Ethic in American Design and Consumption* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) 174, and "A Testimony for The Lord and Truth. Given forth by the Women Friends at their Yearly-Meeting at York; being a tender Salutation of Love to their Friends and Sisters in their several Monthly-Meetings in this County and Elsewhere. From our Yearly Meeting at York, the 28th of the Fourth Month, 1668," *Yearly Meeting of Women Friends Answers to Queries 1668- 1896, 1668, YM/YMWF*. Archive of the Religious Society of Friends London.

⁷ *Observations of the Quaker-Peculiarities of Dress and Language*. (London: Effingham Wilson, Royal Exchange. 1836) 5 and 12. The motivations behind this shift in ideology are discussed in detail in Rumball, *The Relinquishment of Plain Dress*, 105 - 140.

⁸ Elizabeth Isichei, *Victorian Quakers*. (Oxford University Press, 1970) 159

⁹ Elizabeth Isichei, *Victorian Quakers*. (Oxford University Press, 1970) 159

wrong,' by many Quakers because it came from a 'spirit of vanity.'¹⁰ Due to these clashing opinions, the Plain debate raged on for several decades.

[Slide 6: Elizabeth Petipher Cash]

Elizabeth Petipher Cash's Clothing

Elizabeth Petipher Cash was one Quaker who chose to remain Plain. Having been born in 1796, Cash was sixty-five by the time of the relaxation of British Quaker guidance on Plain dress.¹¹ By this age, having worn Plain dress her whole life, it is clear from her clothing, photographs and letters that she never even contemplated abandoning the form of attire she closely associated with her sense of Quaker religious identity.¹² During her formative years, the religion placed strict emphasis on the wearing of Plain dress, as we have heard, and this would have had a profound influence on her future negotiation with clothing, especially in matters of taste and fashionable dress. However, in the final thirty years of her life, her Plain dress also became a form of resistance against the sweeping changes happening in her own religion.

Pious, dedicated and spiritually enlightened, Cash was highly respected in the Quaker community, especially by fellow female Friends. They bestowed upon her increasingly influential positions, which entitled her to some inclusion in the formal debate and decision-making processes of the religion's hierarchy, which were largely in the remit of the men.¹³ An understanding that her life was spent under the control and guidance of her religious community and in pursuit of religious obedience through an unshakable faith, are fundamental to appreciating Cash's decision to never abandon her Plain clothing, even after 'peculiarity of dress and speech [... were made] optional,' in 1861.¹⁴

Bourdieu and Bogatyrev

Anthropologists Pierre Bourdieu and Petr Bogatyrev's observations on twentieth century dress resonate with social models during far earlier periods; particularly the negotiation of dress by late nineteenth century Quaker women. Here, their theories are useful in framing the fraught negotiations going on in the Quaker community after 1861.

In his 1962 essay, "The Peasant and his Body", Bourdieu discussed the conflict between the influence of French urban fashion on rural French communities between the 1930s and the 1950s. He usefully commented that the process of introducing fashionable styles, into communities with an established traditional aesthetic, represented a "clash of civilisations."¹⁵

[Slide 7: Bourdieu Quote]

According to Bourdieu, it is the women of these traditional communities who are more 'adept and quick than men to adopt urban cultural models' because "women are prepared by their whole cultural training to be attentive to the external details of the person [...] this attitude is encouraged by

¹⁰ J. William Frost, "Changing Quaker Ideals for Material Culture," *Quaker Aesthetics. Reflections on a Quaker Ethic in American Design and Consumption* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) 33.

¹¹ Elizabeth Mary Cadbury, *A Dear Memory: Pages from the Letters of Mary Jane Taylor* (39 New Street Birmingham: Cornish Brothers Limited, 1914) 4.

¹² See Rumball, *The Relinquishment of Plain dress*, 220 – 289.

¹³ London and Middlesex Women's Quarterly Meeting Minutes, 1840, 3rd Month. QM. Archive of the Religious Society of Friends London.

¹⁴ Isichei, *Victorian Quakers*, 159 and Thomas C. Kennedy, *British Quakerism 1860-1920* (Oxford University Press, 2001) 216.

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Peasant and his Body," 1962. Re-printed in *Ethnography*, 5. 4. (2004): 579-600.

the whole cultural system.”¹⁶ According to Bourdieu, the sartorial discussions which occur between women, teaches them to observe 'urban models and integrate them.'¹⁷

[Slide 8: Bogatyrev Quote]

Petr Bogatyrev's 1937 theory in, “The Functions of Folk Costume in Moravian Slovakia” is equally pertinent. He noted how, “[...] In the case of villager-versus-townsmen, we find that even during a period of great tension between the two, at a time when the villager was consciously preserving his old dress against the onslaught of urban styles, it happened that some individual peasants were emboldened to 'betray' their costume, thus weakening the tradition [...] Once a few individual peasants allow themselves to make drastic, town-orientated changes in costume, then all or nearly all will feel free to adopt small details of urban dress.”¹⁸

In these observations, there are clear similarities with the waning power Plain dress held in Quaker communities, as the influence of fashionable styles increasingly permeated them.

To borrow the language of Bogatyrev, Cash 'conspicuously preserved' her traditional Plain dress her entire life and chose not to 'betray' her originally religiously prescribed clothing by introducing borrowed elements from urban fashions.¹⁹ In line with Bourdieu's assertions, her decision to remain Plain may be partly explained by the fact that her feminine cultural training during her formative years emphasised traditional Quaker Plainness in dress, as a matter of religious discipline, and not fashionable urban styles. As such, this environment did not 'encourage and foster' an attentiveness towards fashionable dress, and therefore Cash was not taught to 'perceive urban models nor to integrate them into [her] behaviour.'²⁰ Thus, Cash may be read as belonging to the 'opposing' force, or those who made no drastic urban inspired changes to their dress and therefore conspicuously and deliberately resisted altering their traditional clothing.²¹

Mindful of the power of dress to express resistance or conformity, these theorists' ideas resonate with the evidence I found in my wider research on British Quaker women at this time, that a constant, often fraught, sartorial negotiation was being undertaken between the use of Plain and fashionable dress.

Her photographs

[Slide 9: Cash (half one)]

Twelve years after the relaxation of Plain dress customs, Cash is depicted shown still wearing strictly Plain attire.²² In one of her surviving photographic portraits, a *carte de visite* taken in London, in 1873, Cash chose her smartest and neatest garments, and particularly those which would 'reinforce [her] self-representation' as an elderly lifelong Quaker.²³ In it she wears a full-length plain dark silk dress, far removed from the prevailing fashionable styles of wider society. It features a deeply pleated full

¹⁶ Bourdieu, "The Peasant and his Body," 584.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Petr Bogatyrev, *The Functions of Folk Costume in Moravian Slovakia*. Translated from Slovak by Richard. G. Crum, (Re-printed The Hague & Paris: Mouton, [1937] 1971)

¹⁹ Bogatyrev, *The Functions of Folk Costume in Moravian Slovakia*, 60.

²⁰ Bourdieu, "The Peasant and his Body," 590.

²¹ Bogatyrev, *The Functions of Folk Costume in Moravian Slovakia*, 60.

²² C.A. Gandy. Elizabeth Petipher Cash Carte de Visite. 1873. Archive of the Religious Society of Friends, London. © Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain.

²³ Peter Burke. Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence (London: Reaktion, 2001) 26. Miles Lambert, *Fashion in Photographs, 1860-1880* (London: Batsford, 1991) 12.

skirt, but not the elaborately bustled and trimmed styles which were the height of fashion during this time.

[Slide 9: Fashions (half two)]

The fashionable dress of the 1870s was brightly coloured and featured a 'profusion of trimmings and lace' particularly 'silk fringe, satin braid, beads, feathers and silk flowers.'²⁴ The absence of all these features from Cash's clothing would have been particularly conspicuous. It is notable also, that Cash wears a large pale undecorated and un-fringed silk shawl. Two of her shawls survive in the collection of dress at Killerton House National Trust, one of which is particularly lovely.

[Slide 10: Cash's blue shawl]

Shown here, one of Cash's shawls, is made of a double layer of high quality, blue-grey silk, and is lined with mid-grey silk which has a lustrous shine. Lining a shawl was extremely unusual due to the sheer expense of the double layer of the luxury silk fabric. This detail attests to the expense and high quality of this example. At, 114 inches by 78 inches, it would have enveloped her silhouette, draping over her shoulders, as well as covering the back of her skirt and her bodice.²⁵

During the 1870s, as the fashionable silhouette placed great emphasis on the back of the skirt, shawls which concealed this detail, were displaced in favour of shaped jackets.²⁶ Beautiful though Cash's shawl is, by this date it would have been read as a garment illustrative of her deep resistance of fashionable styles.

[Slide 11: Lucretia's wedding dress]

The aesthetic severity of Cash's clothing choices are particularly notable when compared to garments worn by other Quaker women during the same period. The surviving wedding dress, worn by Lucretia Seebohm for her Quaker wedding in 1874, the year following the Cash portrait, is a profusion of effervescent trimmings and lace.²⁷ This wedding dress is an exemplar of the highly fashionable styles that other Quaker women were prepared to wear, and had been since 1861.

[Slide 12: Other Plain Quakers]

Significantly, Cash's choice of a Plain appearance in her 1873 portrait is not an anomaly unique to herself. Photographic portraits in the collection of the Religious Society of Friends Archive in London, display multiple examples of other elderly Quaker women wearing strictly Plain attire after 1861.²⁸ These include Rebecca Philips Fox, who remained similarly committed to her dress until her death in 1875. It is evident that these women, like Cash, preserved the uniform appearance of established Plain Quaker garb. What is also clear from these photographs is that this style of dress was most prevalent amongst the older members of the religion. As older women often adhere to the fashions

²⁴ Lucy Johnston, *Nineteenth-Century Fashion in Detail* (London: V&A Publications, 2005) 60 & 62.

²⁵ Large blue-grey triangular silk shawl worn by Elizabeth Petipher Cash mounted on a mannequin. Made of two layers of silk, with a matt, pale blue- grey silk on one side, and a mid-grey silk on the other. Nineteenth century. KIL/W/04494. © Killerton House National Trust, Devon.

²⁶ Anne Buck, *Victorian Costume and Costume Accessories* (London: Herbert Jenkins, [1961] 1984) 107.

²⁷ Fashionable wedding dress worn by the Quaker Lucretia Seebohm (née Anson Crouch). 1874. Silk gauze, trimmed with silk embroidered net lace, silk satin, lined with silk. T.68 to E-1962. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Web. 12th August 2015. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

²⁸ London Friends Institute. Archive of the Religious Society of Friends. NSA13 Shelf 4.

of their youth, older Quaker women remaining in Plain dress would have been symptomatic of their age as well as their religious belief.²⁹

These portraits prove Cash's appearance to be typical of a faction of the community who relished continuing to resist the fashionable dress of wider society. It is important to remember however, that the Plain custom had become optional, not formally abandoned. Therefore these Plain women were exercising their liberty in opting to remain Plain, resisting the influence of fashionable urban styles from wider society and progressive Quakers, an action which still represented obedience to the religious hierarchy's guidance.

Numerous bouts of bronchitis increasingly depleted her health however, and on April 5th 1894, Cash died at her daughter-in-law's house aged an impressive ninety-five years.³⁰ The given dates of these portrait photographs, alongside the ages of surviving garments, reveal that elderly Quakers who chose to not adapt their clothing to incorporate fashionable dress would clearly have been becoming an increasing minority by 1900.

[Slide 13: Family with Cash]

Conclusion

Richenda Scott has written that the Cash family had always been prepared 'to scorn convention if necessary, to go forward undaunted in any unpopular action which appealed to them as right.'³¹ Cash's conspicuous preservation of her wearing of Plain Quaker garments was far removed from the changing styles of fashionable dress in their undecorated appearance, quiet colour and unfashionable designs. This manner of dressing signalled her deep affiliation with the conservative Plain lifestyle despite its increasing unpopularity in the Quaker community and it indicated her resistance to the fashionable urban styles which were increasingly creeping into Quaker wardrobes.

Thank you.

²⁹ Rumball, Hannah. "British Quaker Women's Fashionable Adaptation of their Plain Dress, 1860–1914" *Costume* 52.2 (September 2018) 249.

³⁰ 'Elizabeth Petipher Cash,' Dictionary of Quaker Biography, DQB CAS (London: Religious Society of Friends Library).

³¹ Richenda Scott, *Elizabeth Cadbury: 1858 – 1951*. (London: George Harrap, 1955) 9.