

# “Commoners Wives who stand for their Freedom and Liberty”: Leveller Women and the Hermeneutics of Collectivities

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**ABSTRACT** In this essay, Melissa Mowry argues that Elizabeth Lilburne and other Leveller women played key roles in articulating the movement’s ideal of collectivity. Between the years 1645 and 1647, the Levellers and other dissidents were singled out by the House of Lords as particularly dangerous. During this period, Leveller women helped publish and distribute pamphlets, giving sympathizers access to critical information and holding the community together. Although Leveller wives often worked behind the scenes, at times they spoke publicly as stakeholders in their households, presenting those spaces as symbols of collective Leveller resistance. **KEYWORDS:** civil war–era women dissidents; collective authorship and interpretation; Elizabeth Lilburne; Ellen Larner; Mary Overton; House of Commons; household as political metaphor

☞ IN JANUARY 1658, Elizabeth Lilburne (fl. 1641–60) petitioned Richard Cromwell and his council for a weekly pension and relief from the heavy fines imposed on the estate of her recently deceased husband, John: “I beg you to discharge the 3,000£ due to the State, and to recommend Parliament to repeal the act, that after 17 years sorrows, I may have a little rest and comfort among my fatherless children.”<sup>1</sup> John Lilburne (1615?–1657), of course, was the well-known radical and Leveller leader. The fines, and Lilburne’s 1651 banishment, were the result of his circulating a petition on behalf of Josiah Primate in an ongoing property dispute; the petition was deemed libelous to Sir Arthur Hesilrige and four others.<sup>2</sup> In return for the pension and the

1. *Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Interregnum, 1658–59*, January 21, 1658/59 (pp. 260–61), available at *British History Online*, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=104039>.

2. *Diary of Sir Thomas Burton, Esq.*, ed. John Towill Rutt (1828), vol. 3, *January–March 1659*, February 28, 1658–59, available at *British History Online*, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/source.aspx?pubid=216>. Burton’s entry lists “Messrs Squibb, Molyns, Winslowe, and Russell,” commissioners for compounding, as the four others who had been libeled (note 2).

relief, Elizabeth Lilburne was required to meet one condition: she must “deliver such papers to colonel Bennet as she had in her custody relating to the matter for which the fines were imposed to be burnt without keeping any copies of them.”<sup>3</sup> Whether Elizabeth complied with the condition remains a mystery, as no record exists of her either surrendering the papers or burning them. The last known public reference to Elizabeth Lilburne came the following year in March 1660, when the Council of State again ordered the arrears of her pension to be paid.<sup>4</sup> About the only definitive conclusion her petition and the surrounding commentary permits is that Parliament *believed* she had her husband’s papers.

Given the indeterminacy of the evidence—what it might or might not say—it is all the more surprising that the few scholars who have examined the roles of women and households in Leveller ideology have willingly cast the Lilburnes and other Leveller couples in traditional roles and treated their marriages as straightforward recapitulations of patriarchal values, external to and often at odds with more progressive dimensions of Leveller politics. Pauline Gregg, for instance, speculates John Lilburne would have “turned in his grave” had he known about Elizabeth’s agreement to surrender the papers.<sup>5</sup> Ann Hughes, the historian who has most recently worked on Leveller women and representations of their status within their households, has argued that patriarchal authoritarianism (implicit in Gregg’s rendering of the Lilburnes’ marriage) was a constitutive feature of anti-monarchist positions during the civil wars:

parliamentarians and republicans also held that it was through rational, authoritative control of their households that men developed and demonstrated their fitness to participate as citizens in the commonwealth, so that for men the public and private were both distinct, and mutually reinforcing.<sup>6</sup>

For Hughes, the political position of Leveller women followed their conjugal position in their households as subordinate to their husbands.<sup>7</sup>

I argue, on the contrary, that Elizabeth Lilburne’s 1658 petition and other Leveller writings reveal that, far from being under the “authoritative control” of and subordinate to their husbands, Leveller women were practically and theoretically integral to the development of the movement’s core commitment to collectivity. They elaborated its affective dimensions and, more significantly, developed and refined its hermeneutic agility. The thematic iterations of collectivity are easily recognizable in

3. Ibid.

4. *Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Interregnum, 1659–60*, February 6, 1659–60, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=54586>. I have been unable to find any record of the pension’s being paid to Elizabeth. Presumably these records would be in the Commonwealth Exchequer Papers, which suffers from uneven preservation and is mostly uncatalogued.

5. Pauline Gregg, *Free-Born John: A Biography of John Lilburne* (Westport, Conn., 1961), 348.

6. Ann Hughes, *Gender and the English Revolution* (London, 2012), 97.

7. For more on the way common law imagined relationships between husband and wife, see Frances Dolan’s useful study, *Marriage and Violence: The Early Modern Legacy* (Philadelphia, 2008).

Leveller writings as celebrations of the “commonalty,” neighborly charity, love, and, in Levellerism’s post-Putney phase, “the People.” But the Levellers also understood collectivity as a praxis for producing both political and epistemological authority, touching everything from the way authorship was implemented in the corporately authored texts of 1647 to 1649, to the way Leveller polemics from 1645 to 1647 taught its readers to interpret and derive authoritative meaning from multiple discursive modalities, often across space and time.

As Frances Dolan has demonstrated, non-elite seventeenth-century readers were accustomed to comparing multiple “true relations” of a given event.<sup>8</sup> Leveller writing from the mid-1640s pressed this habit of the early modern print marketplace into service and transformed it into a formidable political weapon. Rather than relying on readers’ accidental contact with a variety of booksellers, Leveller writers provided their readers with a wide variety of documents between the covers of individual publications: petitions, pamphlets, letters, broadsides, legal documents, and sometimes even dialogues. At its most basic level, this strategy contributed to a more informed public. At a more substantive level, by teaching its readers how to produce knowledge by interpreting works from multiple authors and sources, Leveller writing created a more radicalized public with the tools to sustain its own epistemological authority and with a consequently robust and sturdy commitment to “the People.”

The Levellers’ justifications for their anti-authoritarian hermeneutics had deep roots in Second Reformation theology. Like many whose activism had been awakened in early seventeenth-century nonconformist sects, the Levellers were suspicious of the dogmatic nature of claims to truth, which seemed to them to be the effect of prerogative. They knew from hard experience that any “form or phrase of words which was displeasing to their Cavaleerships” led to punishment for the speaker or writer.<sup>9</sup> However, where Reformation Protestantism tended to treat knowledge as the guarantor of each individual’s “liberty of Conscience” (5), the Levellers viewed knowledge as a social adhesive, pressing the theological principle into a more communitarian register. Interpretive agility for the Levellers was as necessary for life as air: people would “live and die for want of knowledge” (2). But interpretation was not and could not be a solitary undertaking, for, as Richard Overton put it, it was incumbent on those who struggled against authoritarianism to speak up: “even Nature it self doth bind every man to do according to his power.” The abiding ethic of political and hermeneutic collectivity alike was the recognition that “no man is born for himself” (2).

Though seldom recognized for their contributions, Leveller women were critical to elaborating the affective and social dimensions of the movement’s anti-authoritarian hermeneutics. Between the years 1645 and 1647, the Levellers and other dissidents were singled out by the House of Lords as particularly dangerous. Subjected

8. “The [early modern] reader often had to think across evidentiary registers, comparing an oral report to a manuscript newsletter, printed newsbook, or trial account”; Frances Dolan, *True Relations: Reading, Literature, and Evidence in Seventeenth-Century England* (Philadelphia, 2013), 7.

9. Richard Overton, *A Defiance Against All Arbitrary Usurpations* (London, September 1646), 5. Subsequent references are given in the text.

to scrutiny and harassment, Leveller men were imprisoned, one after the other. Their absence, however, did little to stem the flow of their publications, largely because Leveller women continued to work as couriers, editors, and perhaps writers, giving sympathizers access to critical information and holding the community together.<sup>10</sup> Often women worked discreetly behind the scenes, drawing as little attention to themselves as possible. Often, but not always. At crucial moments, Leveller wives parlayed the communitarian mandate of interpretation into a justification for transforming themselves into spokespeople for their richly varied households, the household itself into a major imaginative space of Leveller radicalism during this period, and themselves into stakeholders in it.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in the rapidly evolving context of the 1646/47 persecutions, it was Leveller women like Ellen Larner, Elizabeth Lilburne, and Mary Overton who held the movement's avant-garde.

### 1646

Most historians date the emergence of the Levellers as a recognizable group with a shared political agenda and a fairly stable membership to the summer of 1646, when Richard Overton published *A Remonstrance of Many Thousand Citizens*. This dating, however, fails to account for important precedents set during the prior eight months and the revelation of women's integral contributions.<sup>12</sup> The first civil war had ended earlier that year, in May, when the Scots surrendered Charles I to Parliament. But the coalition that had propelled Parliament to victory proved fragile and, even before the

10. Hermeneutics originally developed as an interpretive posture in relation to sacred texts. During the first Reformation, "we see the dawn of a genuinely modern hermeneutics. Following [Martin] Luther's emphasis on faith and inwardness, it was possible to question the authority of traditional interpretations of the Bible in order to emphasize the way in which each and every reader faces the challenge of making the truths of the text her own"; Bjørn Ramberg and Kristin Gjesdal, "Hermeneutics," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, summer 2013 edition, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/hermeneutics/>.

11. The household had long been a prominent trope in early modern political theory. It is best known as an analogy for various iterations of Tudor and Stuart absolutism, which, as Su Ng has argued, literalized the king's status as father of his people. See Su Fang Ng, *Literature and the Politics of Family in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 2007), 22. So ubiquitous was the view that household and state structures were correlated that even more moderate and nuanced seventeenth-century political theorists, such as William Gouge, held that the household was a training ground—a "little commonwealth"—"whereby men are fitted for greater matters in Church or commonwealth" (William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties. Eight Treatises* [London, 1622], 18). For other perspectives on the relationship between the family and state, see Susan Dwyer Amussen, "'The Part of Christian Man': The Cultural Politics of Manhood in Early Modern England," in *Political Culture and Cultural Politics in Early Modern England: Essays Presented to David Underdown*, ed. Susan Dwyer Amussen and Mark A. Kishlansky (Manchester, 1995); Katharine Gillespie, *Domesticity and Dissent in the Seventeenth Century: English Women Writers and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, 2004); and Susan Wiseman, "'Adam, the Father of all Flesh': Porno-Political Rhetoric and Political Theory in and after the English Civil War," *Prose Studies* 14, no. 3 (1991): 134–57. For more on Gouge's theory, see Erica Longfellow, "Public, Private, and the Household in Early Seventeenth-Century England," *Journal of British Studies* 45, no. 2 (2006): 313–34 at 319.

12. See, for instance, Andrew Sharp, *The English Levellers* (Cambridge, 1998) and David Wooton, "Leveller Democracy," in *The Cambridge History of Political Thought*, ed. J. H. Burns and Mark Goldie (Cambridge, 1991).

Scots had turned over Charles I to the grandees, it had begun to fragment. Though licensing had lapsed in 1640, Parliament had reinstated the practice in 1643 and by 1645 had significantly stepped up its efforts to rein in the clandestine printing of unlicensed books that threatened its authority, singling out many of those who would align themselves with the Levellers in the coming months and years.

It was in response to these persecutions that Richard Overton wrote and published *A Remonstrance of Many Thousand Citizens* (London, July 1646), in which he sought to protect both dissident writing and dissident printing by widening a schism between the House of Lords, which had ordered the persecutions, and the House of Commons. The growing gap between the two houses offered Overton an opportunity to suggest a more radical identity for the lower house by aligning it with a broader commonality. It is revealing that, where we might have expected a strategy based on social station, we find instead Overton describing collectivity as the ontological basis of legitimate political power and an affective mechanism for sustaining that power. On its very first page, *A Remonstrance* rebukes the House of Commons and reminds them that they enjoy their political power only by consent of the people and only on the condition that the Commons prove themselves “fitly quallified, and Faithfull” guardians of the common welfare.

For if you or any other shall assume, or exercise any Power, that is not derived from our Trust and choice thereunto, that Power is no lesse then usurpation and an Oppression, from which wee expect to be freed, in whomsoever we finde it; it being altogether inconsistent with the nature of *just Freedome*. (3)

Any power that is not rooted in the People, according to Overton, is unjust. But what is particularly interesting about Overton’s construction of parliamentary authority is that it is *shared* rather than representative. What makes political power viable is “common equitie” (4). What justifies the People’s *sharing* their power is the “trust and Love” (6) they bear toward Parliament. Indeed, Overton draws the House of Commons affectively closer to the commonality as he closes his argument. Turning to his readers, whom he addresses as “Friends,” Overton points out that these same readers are also Parliament’s “native and undoubted friends” (14), reminding readers and parliamentarians alike that to share power, they must also share amity.

David Adams has argued that *A Remonstrance* “probably had originally nothing to do with Lilburne” and that his appearance in the text was largely an opportunistic response to “the crisis of his arrest and imprisonment.” Though often satirical, Overton was not typically cynical.<sup>13</sup> His construction of parliamentary authority through the

13. David R. Adams, “The Secret Printing and Publishing Career of Richard Overton the Leveller, 1644–46,” *The Library: Transactions of the Bibliographical Society* 11, no. 1 (2010): 3–88 at 54. See also David R. Como, “Print, Censorship, and Ideological Escalation in the English Civil War,” *Journal of British Studies* 51 (2012): 820–57; and Como, “Secret Printing, the Crisis of 1640, and the Origins of Civil War Radicalism,” *Past and Present* 196 (2007): 37–82.

principles of collectivity indicate that he genuinely intended *A Remonstrance* as a reckoning for the dissident community itself. He pointed to the consequences of amity's absence in the political arena and the desperate strains that this absence placed on the social fabric of London's commonality, specifically the arrests and imprisonments of "William Larner and Lieu. Col. John Lilburne," whom Overton names on his title page. Indeed, by the summer of 1646, Overton had well-established if largely covert relationships with both men. Larner had refused to implicate Overton when he himself was arrested in April 1646. In light of these relationships, Larner's and Lilburne's appearances in the *Remonstrance* have to be read as both sincere and deliberate, a measure of Overton's personal stake in amity and collectivity. Overton was mindful of linking Lilburne's and Larner's plights to the larger community, which also included "other worthy Sufferers, who upon Appeale unto you [the House of Commons] have not been relieved" (8).

The last of the Leveller wives to appear in the public record, Elizabeth Lilburne was nonetheless the first woman to help elaborate and shape the movement's embrace of collectivity. Elizabeth Lilburne had been active in sectarian communities for some years before she met her husband and had become known to members of Parliament during the first civil war. But as Parliament began to seek out those who published dissident views, she took on a role in her husband's polemics that would open the door to greater and more central participation by women. In August 1645, the House of Commons arrested John Lilburne for his pamphlet *Copy of a Letter from Lieutenant-Colonel Lilburne to a Friend*. Lilburne, as was his practice, refused to answer the charge and was committed to Newgate, where he was joined by a heavily pregnant Elizabeth. While the couple was in prison awaiting the birth of their child and hoping for John's release, the Lilburne house was searched by the Stationers' agents. Lilburne was quick to seize on the synecdoche between the House of Commons and the commoner's house. He described the domestic intrusion thus:

And none being in the House but an old Gentle-woman at that time whom they much frightened; as they did a young Gentle-woman in another place, to the great danger of her life (insomuch that she cryeth out in her extreme Fever, *Hunscott, Hunscott,*) they ran up into the Chambers, & stole out of his Wives drawers, divers pieces of her Child-bed linnen, and such other things as they pleased, and refused to show the Old-woman what they had stollen, though shee earnestly entreated them.<sup>14</sup>

The scene is clearly intended to appeal emotionally to readers, who are prompted to be outraged on Elizabeth's behalf, who is "great with Child, & neer her time" (42) and whose careful work and preparation for her child is undone, and on behalf of the old

14. John Lilburne, *Englands Birth-Right Justified* (London, November 1645), 42. Subsequent references are given in the text.

gentlewoman apparently left alone in the house to guard the Lilburnes' possessions. The play between the female figures here is fascinating. Elizabeth does not speak; nonetheless, the vulnerability manifest in her pregnancy parallels the vulnerability manifest in the old gentlewoman's age, connecting the two women across space. In her turn, the old gentlewoman functions tropologically to heighten the draw of collectivity as a political principle and to guide readers toward collectivity as a hermeneutic. The passage becomes both intelligible and politically compelling as it directs readers across time and space to see the old gentlewoman as another iteration of the "young Gentlewoman in another place, to the great danger of her life." The link between these three figures stiffens the sense of community—the Lilburne household is one among many thus besieged—while the intergenerational connection further suggests that the indignity suffered by the Lilburne household is a historical condition. If there was any remaining doubt that Lilburne deployed this scene strategically, such doubt is set aside by its conspicuous absence from Huns Scot's account of the same incident. The Stationers' beadle makes mention neither of Elizabeth, nor her childbed linen, nor the old gentlewoman, instead claiming Lilburne's account is a "most false, scandalous, and felonious charge."<sup>15</sup>

No one, then or now, seems to have questioned why Huns Scot went rifling through Elizabeth Lilburne's childbed linen. Certainly, there is ample evidence that the dissident textual community to which the Lilburnes and other Levellers belonged relied on men and women alike to create and disseminate the texts that so unsettled Parliament in the mid-1640s. Huns Scot himself recounts how his search for scandalous books prompted him to examine "one Browne's daughter" who, when asked "of whom she had them she . . . confessed she had them of one Lilburne in Newgate."<sup>16</sup> Even Robert Eeles, the printer who eventually led Huns Scot to Overton's press and a dissident printer himself, was known to work with his wife.<sup>17</sup> Given the fact that women's participation in printing and bookselling was not uncommon, it seems likely that Huns Scot's repeated probes of Leveller households' most intimate recesses were prompted by tips that Leveller women were deeply implicated in the production of these texts. Though

15. Joseph Huns Scot, *The Humble Petition and Information of Joseph Huns Scot Stationer, to both the Honourable Houses of Parliament now assembled, against divers scandalous Libels, and treasonous Pamphlets against Kingly Government, and Parliament Proceedings; as may appear by the very Books herewith presented* (London, June, 1646), 4.

16. *Ibid.*, 3.

17. The entry in the *Journal of the House of Lords* reads:

Upon reading the Petition of the Master and Wardens of the Company of Stationers: shewing, "That Robert Eeles hath in his Custody a Printing Press and Letter, which hath been lately employed in printing scandalous Books; and the said Eeles and his Wife have been common Printers, Sellers, and Dispersors, of such unlicensed Books, and have been often taken in so doing."

It is ordered that the said Press and Letter, in the Custody of the said Eeles, shall be brought to Stationers Hall, and there defaced and made unserviceable.

*Journal of the House of Lords*, vol. 8, 1645–47 [hereafter *JHL* 1645–47]: August 13, 1646 (pp. 463–64), available at British History Online, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=34087>.

Hunscot apparently found nothing substantive in Elizabeth's linens, other radical families were not so lucky.

John Lilburne's imprisonment in 1645 did nothing to halt the clandestine printing of pamphlets, nor did the searching of Elizabeth's childbed linen deter other Leveller wives, who seem on the whole to have increased their contributions to the dissident community. The prosecution campaign against Leveller writing began in October 1645, shortly after John Lilburne was released and around the time of the first publication of *Englands Birth-Right*. Recognizing that imprisoning authors would not be sufficient to close down dissident publications, William Prynne singled out William Larner as a "distributor of Lilburne's pamphlets." Larner was a well-known bookbinder and bookseller among the stalls surrounding St. Paul's and was known to specialize in unlicensed publications. Early in his career, he had published the second (and the only surviving) edition of John Lilburne's *The Christian Man's Triall* (1641), as well as Katherine Chidley's *The Justification of the Independent Churches of Christ* (1641). His ties to Lilburne were notorious, and when it was discovered that he was one of the booksellers selling the pamphlet *A Last Warning to All the Inhabitants of London*, Hunscot had him arrested on March 21, 1645/46. Larner was taken up with fourteen copies of the pamphlet in his possession.<sup>18</sup>

Initially, the Stationers seem to have been under the impression that Larner was the pamphlet's author and printer. Though this was mistaken—Richard Overton had printed and probably written the pamphlet—that supposition led them directly to the tightly knit dissident community and a frustrating series of confrontations with its members.<sup>19</sup> When Larner was arrested, he stoutly refused to give either the lord mayor or the Committee for Examinations information about anyone else involved in the pamphlet's production. Larner's resistance seems only to have made the Stationers more determined to discover and shut down the press responsible. They redoubled their efforts, subsequently arresting other booksellers who had been caught with copies of the pamphlet: Giles Calvert, who would become famous in the next decade for his publications of Quaker writing; Henry Crispin, an apprentice to the stationer Henry Overton; and an unnamed person associated with a bookseller named Woodnett, "living in Cornhill." Neither Calvert nor Crispin implicated Larner, but the person from Woodnett's bookshop did: he "confessed that he received them [copies of the pamphlet] from the said William Lerner."<sup>20</sup> One week later, the Committee for Exami-

18. Larner's self-defense, *A True Relation of All the Remarkable Passages, and Illegall Proceedings of some Sathanicall or Doeg-like Accusers of their Brethren, Against William Larner, a Free-Man of England* (London, May 1646), contains some errors in dating that are likely the result of the pamphlet's hasty production and printing. George Thomason's copy is dated May 2, 1646, but Larner dates the events to 1645 and initially notes his arrest as occurring on March 22. He also indicates that the Committee for Examinations ordered him committed "close prisoner" to the Counter on March 21. The accusation that Larner had printed the pamphlet himself comes from "Mr. Miller," an agent of the lord mayor (p. 14).

19. Adams, "Career of Richard Overton," 6. The information linking Overton to the pamphlet is contained in a manuscript petition by Robert Eeles, who arrested Overton and confiscated his printing press in August 1646.

20. *JHL 1645-47*, March 28, 1646, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=33991>.



nations had a pretty good idea about the particular network that had produced *A Last Warning*. An entry dated April 7 in the *Journal of the House of Lords* reads:

That one *Overton* made the Letter that printed the Book; and that one *Smith* paid him the Money for it; and that one *Woodnott* bought some of the Books by *Larner*; and that *Larner* intreated *Smith* to be bound for the Money.<sup>21</sup>

Despite this conclusion, Richard Overton remained at large and continued to operate his press until August, printing several defenses of Larner and Lilburne. The record seems to bear witness to significant confusion about *which* Overton (Henry or Richard) had the “Letter” or type that had printed the pamphlet. Subsequent examinations of Larner’s brother John, who worked for him, and his elderly servant Jane Hale, did nothing to clarify matters. For their willingness to follow William Larner’s example in refusing to answer the questions put to them, John and Jane were committed to the Fleet prison on April 14.<sup>22</sup>

The commitment to collectivity and friendship Overton would articulate so forcefully just a few months later were clearly anticipated by and operational in these events. Overton’s partial anonymity indicates that the booksellers who protected his identity or otherwise prevaricated on his behalf understood his printing and writing to be important—so important they were willing to make it a matter of principle. When Larner appeared before the lord mayor, he borrowed the strategy his friend John Lilburne had used in his Star Chamber trial in 1638: “I desire the Liberty of a *Free-man of England*, not to Answer to any Interrogatories, whereby to *accuse my self, or others*.”<sup>23</sup> However, where Lilburne’s initial resistance to prerogative authority had more to do with presenting himself as a martyr, Larner’s refusal to incriminate himself or others had more to do with preserving community. This distinction was not lost on those who had arrested him. Hunscoth noted that Larner “had learned so much of Lilbornes Language that he appealed to the [House of] Commons.”<sup>24</sup> From this perspective, Larner’s refusal to answer questions was vastly more than a jurisdictional dust-up. Larner explicitly links the injustice leveled at him to potential injustice leveled at others. He further defines his liberty as the liberty to resist “any Interrogatories, whereby to *accuse my self, or others*” and to be transformed thereby into the singular agent of the commonality’s corrosion. Or to put it another way, William Larner understood liberty to be constituted through the right to defy the House of Lords’ efforts to render him an individual separate from the commonality.

21. *JHL* 1645–47, April 7, 1646, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=33998>.

22. It is unclear how Overton remained unknown to both the Stationers and the House of Lords and thus at large for four months after they came to a consensus that he was the pamphlet’s printer. Though David Adams seems unaware of this entry in the *Journal of the House of Lords*, he offers some tantalizing evidence to the effect that those booksellers singled out by Hunscoth were covering for Overton; “Career of Richard Overton,” 51–53. For the examination of John Larner and servant Jane Hale, see Larner, *A True Relation*, 7.

23. Larner, *A True Relation*, 4.

24. Hunscoth, *Humble Petition*, 6.

Though the Committee for Examinations had ordered that Larner be kept “close prisoner,” he still managed to smuggle out and publish copies of his writing, which Richard Overton obligingly printed on his press: *A True Relation* (May 1646), *A Vindication of Every Free-Mans Libertie* (undated), and *Every Mans Case*. To these endeavors Ellen Larner proved instrumental as both courier and author. Like Elizabeth Lilburne and Mary Overton, Ellen Larner is visible largely through her husband’s descriptions, her own petitions, and a few public records. Her petitions appear in the first and the last of these pamphlets, but it is her role in *A True Relation* that most clearly reveals the ways in which Leveller women enriched and enlivened otherwise stolid arguments about the nature of political authority. *A True Relation* more or less follows the course of Larner’s experiences after his arrest, offering readers an account of his questioning before the lord mayor. But when he is turned over to the House of Lords, the pamphlet adopts a different strategy:

Thus Courteous Readers, this our Worthy Friend, and Fellow-Commoner of England, being turned over to the House of Peers, I shall first present thee with the Copy of Three Petitions, one from his Wife to the House of *Commons*, and two from himself, to the house of Lords, with two Letters from him to *Parliament-men*; before I present thee with the particular Passages concerning this busse in the House of Peeres; but first I shall insert the Copy for the two Warrants for his, and his two servants Commitments. (6–7)

Inaugurating a strategy that Lilburne himself would reprise in *Londons Liberty in Chains* (1646), Larner required readers to adopt a hermeneutics of collectivity. Readers’ interpretation of the multiple discursive modalities, including Ellen’s petition, relied on their first accepting that William Larner was a “Worthy Friend, and Fellow-Commoner.”<sup>25</sup>

Ellen Larner’s petition appears after the House of Lords’ commitment of John Larner and Jane Hale “for refusing to take Oath to testify their knowledge” (7), suggesting that, in the author’s mind, John’s and Jane’s steadfast commitment to “Lilburn’s Language” and the commonality both structured and precipitated Ellen’s decision to intervene on their behalf with the House of Commons.<sup>26</sup> Her petition begins formulaically—“To the Right Honourable, the Knights, Citizens, and burgesses in Parliament Assembled”—and initially offers a measured account of William’s commitment to and service in Parliament’s cause during the first civil war, complete with what he is owed in arrears. However, the purpose of Ellen’s petition is not to enumerate her

25. It is worth noting here that some of Larner’s rhetorical strategies are indebted to John Lilburne’s pamphlet *Englands Birth-Right Justified*, published in October and November 1645. It may have been this pamphlet to which Prynne was referring when he labeled Larner a printer of Lilburne’s pamphlets, though neither the October nor the November printing carries Larner’s name.

26. No petition from Ellen appears in the *Journal of the House of Commons*, making it likely that it was written for the pamphlet alone.

husband's virtues; rather it is to draw readers in and direct them to the affective dimensions of the principles for which they both stand. Evidence of her distress builds quickly as Ellen details the indignities to which the Larner household has been subjected:

And during his absence since his return home, the Wardens and Beadle of the Company of Stationers, did sundry times search, ransack and break open your Petitioners Trunks, and injuriously carry away her goods, contrary to Law, and any Warrant which they could produce; And since his return home, he hath been by the malice and instigation of the said Wardens and Beadle committed to close Prison, and is yet in custody, and your Petitioner, being with childe, seeing the violent apprehension of her husband, fell into a dangerous sicknesse, to her great charge and dammage, by all which agreevances, Your Petitioners estate is totally consumed, and her Husband greatly indebted, and is utterly unable to defray the charge of imprisonment, supply the extream wants of his Family, (which is 6. Persons,) or relieve his aged Father and Mother, who are past Labour, and were lately Plundered in *Gloster-shire*, or satisfie his Creditors. (8)

Though Ellen's petition is written in her own voice, its echoes of John Lilburne's distress over the ransacking of his wife's goods as her own pregnancy was about to come to term are manifest. Ann Hughes has suggested that the tracts produced around the Leveller imprisonments in 1646 work assiduously to portray Leveller men as victimized patriarchs: "A melodramatic image of the respectable householder, plucked from the society of family and friends, was central to these prison stories."<sup>27</sup> Clearly, there are elements in both of these descriptions that reflect Hughes's claims. Both vignettes highlight the pregnancies of Elizabeth and Ellen, signaling both their vulnerability and their status as wives. Both describe households that include loyal servants, arguably emphasizing that John Lilburne and William Larner were each householders. A more careful reading of these two tales, however, exposes significant differences and reveals the ways in which Ellen Larner's petition set the stage for the transformation of Leveller women from weaker vessels needing their husband's protection to neighbors and friends with a stake in "common equitie."

John Lilburne's description six months earlier in *Englands Birth-Right* emphasizes Elizabeth's proximity to her husband; she is safe under his protection. Ellen Larner, however, is separated from her husband. In this physical and political space, Ellen emerges as the spokesperson for her household. She simultaneously locates herself at the center of the national political drama and self-identifies as a stakeholder both in her household and in the House of Commons. She unequivocally claims that

27. Hughes, *Gender and the English Revolution*, 171.

agents of the Stationers' Company had violated *her* household, speaking of "Your Petitioners Trunk," and "her goods." This sense of collaborative householding and mutual investment is further reinforced by Ellen's sense of self-sacrifice; she describes her willingness to write in defense of her father- and mother-in-law despite her own illness and concern that she might miscarry. Moreover, Ellen's inclusion of her father- and mother-in-law in her household helped to secure the affective and political contours of the Levellers' construction of political authority. Her willingness to speak on behalf of those unable to speak for themselves renders Ellen Larner a legitimate repository of love and charity, the constitutive features of a "Fellow-Commoner," and reinforces her identity as a political stakeholder.<sup>28</sup>

Ellen Larner's petition not only underlines the discursive collectivity of *A True Relation* but also reaches beyond the pamphlet's physical limits to link the Larner household to the Lilburne household. Inviting audiences to read across the two pamphlets, Elizabeth Lilburne's vignette and Ellen Larner's petition work together to build the case for Hunscot's villainy. Separated by space and time, the two pamphlets also map the community to which the Larners and the Lilburnes belonged, tying the two women and their households together. Finally, they may reveal without confessing, as David Adams has suggested, that Ellen Larner and Elizabeth Lilburne likely each had a hand in writing and certainly participated in purveying dissident texts.<sup>29</sup>

When we begin to look at texts as communal effects rather than solitary expressions, a number of relationships jump to the fore. Not only are Leveller wives linked across these polemics but the collaborative nature of William and Ellen's authorship is also highlighted. Much to Joseph Hunscot's consternation, at least two manuscripts of *A True Relation* existed: the one Hunscot confiscated from William and the one that made it to Overton's press, probably via Ellen.<sup>30</sup>

Just how much Ellen Larner's petition transformed Leveller women into avatars of collectivity, both socially and hermeneutically, is evident in the only work publicly attributed to Elizabeth Lilburne, her petition of September 1646. It is an extremely nuanced defense of her husband John, augmented and enriched both by her personal reputation, well established by 1646, and by the shape of Leveller writing during the summer of the persecutions.<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth was no stranger to dissent. Ann Hughes has written that, around the time she and John married in 1641, she was arrested for attend-

28. Richard Overton explicitly uses this metaphor in his own self-defense in *The Commoners Complaint* (London, 1646/47), 20. This pamphlet is the source of the quotation in my title, "Commoners Wives who stand for their Freedom and Liberty" (p. 20).

29. Adams, "Career of Richard Overton," 49–50.

30. Hunscott, *Humble Petition*, 7.

31. Elizabeth Lilburne's life in the public record is both more voluminous and more complex than either Ellen Larner's or Mary Overton's. Unlike the other two Leveller wives, Elizabeth Lilburne made multiple appeals to both Parliament and Oliver Cromwell for financial relief. Many of these petitions are recorded in the *Journal of the House of Commons* and the *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic* series. However, none of her petitions for financial relief, as opposed to John's release from prison, were published and available for sale in the way her 1646 petition was.

ing a Baptist congregation in Stepney. In 1642, John was among a group of parliamentary soldiers captured and scheduled to be executed in Oxford. Elizabeth interceded with Parliament on the men's behalf, and, heavily pregnant, carried Parliament's threat to execute "*lex talionis*" (the law of an eye for an eye) on its royalist prisoners should the parliamentary soldiers be executed.<sup>32</sup> The ploy worked, and John and the others were freed. By the time she came to write her petition, she was well known to Parliament and the public alike, and the publication of her petition in late August or early September 1646 was only the most recent of her appearances on the public stage. That Elizabeth Lilburne was aware of Ellen Larner's petition seems self-evident on the grounds of textual evidence, as the two women chose virtually identical openings. The interceding months between Ellen Larner's petitions in April and June and Elizabeth Lilburne's petition in September had seen the further arrests of John Lilburne in June and Richard Overton in August.

Perhaps because the 1646 broadside petition is the only publication known to have carried Elizabeth Lilburne's name and despite ample evidence that she submitted other petitions, scholars have long suspected either that her signature is only an imprimatur or that she had a collaborator.<sup>33</sup> On this point, I am inclined to agree with Ann Hughes, who has argued that the question of authorship is in some ways moot, for it is clear enough that Elizabeth was an active participant in her nation's political life.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the broadside petition is striking for the way Elizabeth positions herself with regard to the House of Commons. Though she is formulaically deferential, Elizabeth Lilburne's petition is frank, unapologetic, and manifests a clear understanding of where the House of Commons' loyalties *ought* to lie, much in the vein of Overton's *Remonstrance*. In this regard, it is entirely consistent with her masterful account of the Lilburne's property dispute in her 1658 petition. As was customary, the petition opens with a description of Elizabeth's identity inflected by current circumstances:

The humble Petition of Elizabeth Lilburne, Wife to Leut. Coll: John Lilburne who hath been for above eleven weeks by past, most unjustly divorced from him, by the House of *lords*, and their Tyranicall Officers, against the Law of *God*, (and as she conceives) the Law of the *Land*.<sup>35</sup>

Superficially, Elizabeth's opening merely expresses her right and her desire to be brought back under John's cover. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that she quickly inverts the patriarchal convention in order to open up her political argument. For Elizabeth, as for Ellen Larner, the larger injustice for which she seeks redress is manifest in

32. Hughes, *Gender and the English Revolution*, 57; Gregg, *Free-Born John*, 103.

33. I lean toward the latter scenario, as the style of the petition's opening and its concluding paragraph are inconsistent with the self-importance that typically marked John Lilburne's writings.

34. Hughes, *Gender and the English Revolution*, 165.

35. Elizabeth Lilburne, *To the chosen and betruſted knights, citizens, and burgesſes, aſſembled in the High and Supream Court of Parliament. The humble Petition of Elizabeth Lilburne* ([London], [1656]).

the House of Lords' enforced fragmentation of the conjugal couple—it has “unjustly divorced” John and Elizabeth and consequently straitened the family's circumstances.

The only redress Elizabeth seeks and will, perhaps, accept is for the House of Commons to remember its duty by reading across the multiplicity of sources she assembles. In what is likely a collaborative paragraph, Elizabeth goes on to remind the House of Commons, in a mode that is sharply evocative of Overton's *Remonstrance*, of its own publicly proclaimed values:

That you only and alone, are chosen by the COMMONS OF ENGLAND to maintain their *Lawes*, and *Liberties*, and to do them *Justice* and Right (*a*) which you have often before *God* and the World *sworne* to do (*b*) yea, and in divers of your *Declarations* declared, it is your duty (in regard of the trust reposed in you) so to do . . . , (*h*) implicating the *Judgments of Heaven* to fall upon you, when you decline these ends, you judging it the greatest *scandall* that can be laid upon you, that you either do or intend to *subvert the Lawes, Liberties, and Freedomes of the people*, (*i*) which *freedomes* &c you yourselves call, the COMMON BIRTHRIGHT OF ENGLISHMEN, (*k*) who are borne equally free, and to whom the Law of the Land is an equall inheritance) and therefore you confess in your Declaration of 23 *Octob.* 1642 (*l*) It is your duty to use your best endeavours, that the meanest of the *Commonalty*, may enjoy their own *birth right, freedome, and liberty* of the *Lawes of the Land*, being *equally* (as you say) *intituled thereunto with the greatest subject*, The knowledge of which as comming from your own mouths and pen, imboldneth your *Petitioner* (with confidence) to make her humble addresses to you, and to put you in mind that her husband aboute two moneths agoe made his formall and legall *appeal* to you against the injustice, and usurpation of the *Lords* acted upon him, which you received, read, committed and promised him Iustice. But as yet no report is made of his business, nor any reliefe or actuall Iustice holden out unto him, although you have since found time to passe the Compositions as pardons, for the infranchising many of those that your selves have declared *Traytors*, and *Enemies* to the *Kingdome*, which is no small cause of sorrow to your *Petitioner*, and many others, that her *Husband* who hath adventured his *life*, and all that he had in the World, in your lowest condition for you, should be so sleighted and disregarded by you, *as though you had forgot* the duty you owe to the *Kingdome*, and your many *oaths, vowes, and Declarations*, which neglect hath hastned the almost utter ruine of your *Petitioner* her *husband*, and *small Children*.<sup>36</sup>

36. The marginal notations indicated by parenthetical letters in the petition's text are almost certain evidence of a collaborator. However, circumstantial evidence exists that suggests Elizabeth's collaborator may have been Richard Overton rather than John Lilburne. John had been kept “close prisoner” in the Tower during the late summer and, although this restriction was relaxed in September, none of his writings from earlier that year suggest he had a copy of Edmund Coke's legal commentary with him.

Long-winded and arguably strident, Elizabeth Lilburne's petition adds several fascinating dimensions to the hermeneutic of collectivity ventured by the Larners some months earlier. Consistent with much Leveller polemic, she reiterates the analogy between the House of Commons and commoners' houses. Disorder in one means disorder in the other. She also vastly enriches that analogy. Reappropriating what had become, for the Levellers, Parliament's galling propensity to invoke its own privilege and social superiority, Elizabeth stakes a claim to intellectual privilege. Each parenthetical letter in the text corresponds to a note in the margin that offers the source of the claim. The precedent set by Leveller polemics in the preceding months is clearly at play here. This particular construction likewise called upon members of the House of Commons to produce knowledge by reading across discursive differences. In so doing, however, Elizabeth effectively leveled the playing field between MPs and the Levellers' more ordinary audiences. Perhaps because of the petition's heuristic subtext, the House of Commons rejected Elizabeth's conclusions on the grounds that this was a declaration, not a petition.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, her unflinching candor—her ready willingness to come to the conclusion that the House of Commons' refusal to grant her husband a hearing made them “men that seek them selves more than the publique good”—made her vulnerable to physical abuse. “[P]eacably waiting” outside Parliament for an answer to her petition, Elizabeth found herself assaulted and nearly choked to death by an MP.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the rejection of her petition and her lack of other forays into broadside versions of that genre, Elizabeth and her writing continued to play a central role in Leveller publication and the development of a hermeneutics of collectivity. Among the most vivid illustrations of women's evolving contributions to the inextricable relationship between Leveller politics and their interpretive methodology is John Lilburne's pamphlet *Londons Liberty in Chains Discovered* (November 1646). Inasmuch as William Larners' debt to Lilburne is evident in his response to the House of Lords' questions, Lilburne's debt to the Larners is even more explicit in *Londons Liberty*. As Larners did in *A True Relation*, Lilburne collects a variety of discursive modalities that must be interpreted collectively. In support of his proclamation that “Freedome and Liberty being the onely Jewells in esteem with the Commonalty” (1), Lilburne attached various documents, which function, like those in William Larners' pamphlet, only in the aggregate to “discover” the “chains” that bind London's liberty. These were “The

Richard Overton, on the other hand, explicitly describes clinging to his copy of Coke as he was bodily removed to Newgate after refusing to answer charges at the bar of the House of Lords. Moreover, Richard Overton was conspicuously concerned with the fate of Elizabeth's petition. In his pamphlet *An Arrow Against All Tyrants* (London, October 1646), published the month before John Lilburne's *Londons Liberty in Chains*, Overton included a letter to Henry Marten wherein he complains, “Your unseasonable absence from the House, chiefly while Mistress Lilburns Petition should have been read (you having a REPORT to make in her husbands behalfe, whereby the hearing thereof was defer'd and retarded) did possesse my mind with strong jealousies and feares of you, that you either preferred your own pleasure or private interest before the execution of justice and judgement” (19).

37. John Lilburne, *Londons Liberty in Chains Discovered* (London, November 1646), 64.

38. *Ibid.*, 32–33.

Charter" (3); "The Copy of the Protestation made by the Citizens of *London* 29 of *Septemb.* 1646" (13); "A Postscript written by Lieutenant Colonel John Lilburne, Prisoner in the Tower of London, *Octob.* 1646," which includes multiple references to scripture (17); a "Letter to Mr. *Woolaston*, the chief Jaylor of Newgate," of June 13, 1646 (23); "The Copy of the Order" from the House of Lords (for Lilburne's arrest) (24); "To the Honourable the Knights, Citizens and Burgesses of the Commons House in Parliament Assembled. The humble Petition of William Sycks, and Thomas Johnson, Marchants, on the behalf of themselves, and all the freemen of England," March 4, 1645 (43); and "To the Chosen and betruſted Knights, Citizens and Burgesses assembled in the high and ſupream Court of Parliament. *The Humble Petition of Elizabeth Lilburne*" (65). The formidable proliferation of documents contained in the single pamphlet, including Elizabeth Lilburne's September 1646 broadside petition, is powerfully suggestive. It evokes the Levellers' understanding both of political authority as constituted through the production of knowledge and of knowledge itself as a collaborative undertaking. But what clinches this understanding as a fully realized hermeneutic, clearly operational even in 1646, is Lilburne's almost touching willingness to render explicit what had been implicit in the "house-breaking" vignettes:

Courteous Reader, by reason I am prohibited to have Pen, Ink, and Paper; I am forced now to write a peece, and then a peece, and scarce have time and opportunity seriously to pence and correct what I write; and in regard I cannot be at the Presse, either to correct, or revise my own lines (which besides is attended with many difficulties and hazards,) I must intreat thee, as thou readest, to amend with the Pen, what in sence or quotations may be wanting, or false; & I shall rest thy true and faithful Country-man, ready to spend my bloud for the fundamentall Lawes and Liberties of *England*, against any power what-ever that would destroy them. (72)

Lilburne's characterization of his predicament is astonishing on a number of fronts. Rightly considered the most explicit individualist among Leveller polemicists, "free-born John" Lilburne frames his recourse to the collected documents assembled in *Londons Liberty* as an extraordinary means to which he must resort as a consequence of his "close" imprisonment. Yet, the pull of collectivity is powerful for Lilburne. For he finds therein not only common cause but also common affection. Indeed, Lilburne's awareness of and need to be connected to other like-minded individuals was in many ways definitive of his larger political goals. At the same time he reaches back to the recent past of radical persecutions, he reaches forward to the near future of his readers to call upon the collaborative production of knowledge wherein readers might work with him to construct through-lines of right meaning in the otherwise uncorrected texts he has assembled. In obvious ways, Lilburne's yearning for collaboration suggests that a like-minded community of readers existed, an assumption supported by the historical



record. Beyond that, however, Lilburne's calling upon its members to aid in the correct interpretation of the text is further evidence the Levellers understood collectivity not only as a political principle but also as an interpretive methodology.

~ 1646/47

Elizabeth Lilburne's involvement in her husband's continued publications is certain. Despite his imprisonment, Lilburne published *The Oppressed Mans Oppressions Declared* in January 1646/47. But it proved to be the last straw: the Lilburne house was once again raided and Stationers' agents loaded "three porters with Lilburne's papers and other goods."<sup>39</sup> During the months between October 1645 and February 1646/47, the textual community that had enabled Overton's press to go undetected even after Larner's arrest apparently had proved itself equally adept at shielding Elizabeth and her household from further insult, despite her outspoken defense of John the preceding September. It may be that the discovery and subsequent arrest of Mary Overton stitching together copies of Lilburne's pamphlet *Regall Tyrannie*, perhaps supplied by Elizabeth, the preceding month in January alerted the authorities to Elizabeth's continued involvement. Whatever the case, the scales tipped against Elizabeth once again. On February 8, a warrant was issued for her arrest for dispersing John's books. Both Lilburnes were ordered to appear before the Committee for Examinations.

Pauline Gregg notes that Elizabeth only delivered a signed written statement.<sup>40</sup> She was not, however, silent. John himself reports that she grew increasingly frustrated with the Committee's continued interruptions of her husband with questions. Unable to contain herself, she burst out:

I told thee often enough long since, that thou would serve the Parliament, and venter thy life so long for them, till they would hang thee for thy paines, and give thee *Tyburn* for thy recompense, and I told thee besides, thou shouldst in conclusion find them a company of unjust, and unrighteous Judges, that more sought themselves, and their owne ends, then the publique good of the Kingdome, or any of those that faithfully adventured their lives therefore.<sup>41</sup>

Though Lilburne successfully sought to have her outburst overlooked on the grounds that she was a "woman," Elizabeth's are not the words of someone who has waited passively in the background simply doing her husband's bidding, but rather those of someone who sees herself with a vested interest—a stakeholder, very much in the mold of Ellen Larner, in the "common equitie."

The Levellers' propensity for hybridized documents, begun by William Larner, continued with Richard Overton's publication of *The Commoners Complaint* (appearing only two days after the Lilburnes had been examined) and Mary's petition (which

39. Gregg, *Free-Born John*, 152.

40. *Ibid.*

41. John Lilburne, *The Resolved Man's Resolution* (London, April 1647), 8.

would be published as a pamphlet in March). If Elizabeth Lilburne's presence in a variety of historical documents is prolix, there is a corresponding surfeit of evidence of Mary Overton's life. Like Ellen Larner and Elizabeth Lilburne, Mary entered the public sphere of print culture as a consequence of the Leveller persecutions of 1646. She appears briefly in the *Journal of the House of Lords* when she is arrested with her brother, Thomas Johnson, in November 1646 at the house she shared with Richard, who was already imprisoned in Newgate.<sup>42</sup> Like those who preceded her before the bar, Mary remained silent when she was called before the Lords to answer charges, presumably, like her husband, refusing to recognize the upper house's jurisdiction over a commoner. For her trouble, Mary was sent to Bridewell Hospital. Her commitment appears in the Bridewell records, but the wider public would have learned of Mary's fate through two other documents: Richard Overton's pamphlet *The Commoners Complaint: Or, A Dreadful Warning from Newgate, to the Commons of England* (London, February 10, 1646/47) and her broadside petition, *To the right Honourable, Knights, Citizens and Burgesses, the Parliament of England assembled in Westminster, the humble Appeale and Petition of Mary Overton, prisoner in Bridewell* (London, March 24, 1646/47). Most historians have accepted Richard Overton's claim to have written Mary's petition, printed in *An Appeal from the Degenerate Representative Body of the Commons of England* (London, July 1647). There is no way of knowing for sure, but it is highly likely that a third party was involved at least in transmitting information to Richard, who was imprisoned at the time of Mary's arrest and subsequent commitment to Bridewell. Further evidence suggesting a third party resides in the fact that the *Journal of the House of Lords* records her brother's name as Thomas Johnson, whereas the broadside petition gives it as Thomas Overton—an error that neither Richard nor Mary is likely to have made.<sup>43</sup> Regardless of whether the two documents share a common author or simply a common idiom, they joined the expanding corpus of Leveller polemics to emphasize collectivity as a constitutive dimension of England's commonality and charitable affection as its defining virtue.

Richard Overton's *The Commoners Complaint* includes a telling formal innovation to the oeuvre of Leveller writing in 1646, indicating that a discernible through-line directly pertaining to Leveller wives had emerged in what might otherwise appear to be merely an ad hoc strategy. When Lilburne's *Londons Liberty* was published in

42. *JHL* 1645–47, January 6, 1646/47. It is quite likely that Mary Overton's brother is the same Thomas Johnson, merchant, whose complaints against monopolies John Lilburne included as one of the documents that comprised *Londons Liberty in Chains*. If so, it is more likely that the Leveller Richard Overton was the Richard Overton who matriculated as a sizar at Cambridge, as Nicholas MacDowell has argued, and not the Richard Overton who signed the conversion document in Holland. This supposition was based on the fact that the Dutch document also included a signature of one Thomas Overton, likely a relation of Dutch Richard. See Nicholas MacDowell, *The English Radical Imagination: Culture, Religion, and Revolution, 1630–1660* (Oxford, 2004), 4.

43. The exact phrasing is "Thomas Overton, her husbands brother" (*Humble Appeale and Petition of Mary Overton*, 6). Though Richard Overton claims to have written the broadside petition and the intertextuality is suggestive of his hand, the phrasing here seems to contradict that claim.

November 1646, it introduced the reprint of Elizabeth's petition with the following justification:

And now to conclude at the present; because there is not any discourse of mine own abroad in Print (since I was first locked up so close, *as I was by the Lords in Newgate*) by way of Narrative, to state my case to the world; I shall, it may bee, informe and silence, many mens censures; by inserting first my Wifes late Petition to the House of Commons. (64)

Picking up on Lilburne's cue, Overton raises the value of narrative organized around women's intervention to include an emplotment:

Wherein (as in a Glasse) [parentheses handwritten] every Free-man of *England* may clearly behold his own imminent insufferable bondage and slavery under the *Norman-Prerogative* Men of this Kingdom, represented by the present sufferings of *Richard Overton*; who for his just Vindication of the *Commoners* Rights and Freedoms against the Arbitrary Domination of the House of Lords, hath by them bin imprisoned these 6 Months in the Goal of Newgate, his wife and his brother also by them most unjustly cast into *Maiden Lane*, prison: And from thence, she (with her tender babe of half a years age in her armes), was for refusing active subjection to their Arbytrary Orders, draggd most barbarously and inhumanely head-long upon the stones through the streets in the dirt and mire (as was her husband formerly (*Novemb. 3 1646*) for the said cause worse then Rebels, Traytors, Thieves, or Murtherers, to the place of execution: And in that most contemptible and villainous manner cast into the most reproachful, infamous Goal of Bridewell: And their 3 small children (as helpelesse Orphans bereft of Father and Mother, Sister and Brother) exposed to the mercy of the wide world. (Title page)

Appearing six weeks before Mary's petition was published in pamphlet form, *The Commoners Complaint* provided a crucial context for Mary's self-portrait and helped solidify the politically dissident dimensions of her own subsequent petition.

Despite Richard's and Mary's separate imprisonments and the constraint placed on their textual communities, Richard remained remarkably well informed, an indication of the community's likely breadth and depth, and its ingenuity in getting him information. In *The Commoners Complaint*, Overton reveals his knowledge of subsequent assaults on his household. Dissatisfied that they had successfully confiscated all of Richard's "seditious" writings and stopped their distribution, the House of Lords had ordered a third raid on the Overton house, where they accosted Richard's sister and her husband, who presumably were also involved in the distribution of pamphlets. According to Richard, though, the couple resided at the house only because of their

present “necessity,” and “were forced to live with me and only remained for the oversight, ordering, and tendance of [his] three children in the absence of their Father and Mother” (16). Most interesting is what happens next, as the agents of the Stationers’ Company carry out their orders:

But he being out of the way; & she by the great mercy of God, escaping their hands, (through the ignorance of her face) fled, & hid her selfe, and some adjacent neighbours (touched with compassion and pittie over the poore, afflicted, destitute, hellesse children) took them, for the present, into their houses; and so *Father, Mother, Children, and All*, being *driven out of House and home, the Doores were shut up*; and I, and mine, exposed to utter ruine and confusion by those insulting, domineering, mercillesse Usurpers and Tyrants, *The House of Lords*. (16)

The rhetoric of domesticity is, of course, abundantly in evidence here, as it was in earlier pamphlets. But that idiom is also critically sustained and in many ways superseded, as it is elsewhere in descriptions of Leveller households, by the rhetoric of community. Where the House of Lords has successfully fractured the Overtons’ nuclear family (with Richard and Mary as the beleaguered patriarch and matriarch), the Overtons’ extended family and the larger community has proved durable in the face of aristocratic privilege and prerogative. Both Richard’s sister and her husband evade arrest, and the children are sheltered by neighbors, preserved and protected against abandonment and self-reliance. “Touched with compassion and pittie,” the neighbors intercede on the children’s behalf, an iteration of the friendship that sustains Leveller concepts of collectivity.

The contrast between his neighbors’ care and the House of Lords’ disdain is very much on Richard’s mind as he pleads with the House of Commons to intervene on Mary’s behalf:

Now Sir, I humbly desire this Honourable Committee to consider, whether it be reasonable or sufferable, or any wise sutable to the freedoms of the Commons of *England*, or to the great trust reposed in you, either for you to suffer, or for them to usurpe such an unlimited prerogative jurisdiction, to deprive husbands of their wives, and wives of their husbands; Fathers and Mothers of their Children, and Children of their Fathers and Mothers; cast them into severall infamous tormenting prisons, hale and drag them in most barbarous manner, the Commoners wives and their tender Infants upon the stones of the streetes through all the dirt, and the mire, as if the Commoners, their wives and Children were but as dirt and mire under their Lordships feet, to be trampled upon at their pleasure. (20)

Poignant and full of paternal affection, Overton's complaint is, nonetheless, framed by a detail we ought not to overlook. For his anxiety about his family's distress is heightened by the absence of social charity manifest in the House of Lords' refusal "to looke after" the children or "take any charge or care over them," which contrasts sharply with the care shown by the Overtons' neighbors.

Mary Overton's petition was not published until March 1646/47, six weeks after her husband's account in *The Commoners Complaint*. It describes a woman who was dispositionally like Ellen Larner and Elizabeth Lilburne and, more significantly, whose rhetoric was uncannily similar. Like Ellen Larner, Mary Overton found herself supporting an extended family—herself, her three children, her brother-in-law, and her sister—after her husband's arrest and the seizure of his goods in August 1646. Her home was later searched again by officers of the House of Lords looking for more of Richard Overton's writings. As Mary Overton described matters, Officers of the House of Lords fulfilled their orders to

search, ransack and rifle your Petitioners house, her trunks, chests, &c. to rob, steal, plunder, and beare away all her goods, which were her then present livelihood for her imprisoned husband, her selfe, and three small children, her brother and sister.<sup>44</sup>

One can imagine that, with both Overtons and both Lilburnes in prison, those associated with the Levellers in early 1646/47 would feel the stakes raised on their political principles. Mary's rather pointed resistance to painting her oppression in singular terms transforms the conflict staged in her home into a conflict between collectivities—the "Officers of the House of Lords," on the one hand, and "her selfe, and three small children, her brother and sister," on the other—over the thematic content of collectivity itself. The officers' actions are cast as an effort to strip Overton of the remaining means she has to keep her domestic collectivity intact in her and her husband's absence.

Mary Overton resists similar degradations of her own identity vociferously and multifacetedly, all the time sustaining and reinforcing her role as the social adhesive that binds her family. In addition to suffering violations of her household, Overton complains that she,

with her tender Infant in her armes of halfe a yeares age, was most in-humane and barbarously dragged headlong upon the stones through all the dirt and the mire in the streets, and by the way was most unjustly reproached and vilified by their Officers, with the scandalous, infamous names of wicked Whore, Strumpet, &c. and in that contemptible,

44. Mary Overton, *To the right Honourable, the Knights, Citizens, and Burgesses, the Parliament of England assembled at Westminster, the Humble Appeal and Petition of Mary Overton, prisoner in Bridewell* (London, 1646), 6. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

barbarous manner was cast into the most reproachfull Goale of Bride-well, that common center of Whores, Strumpets, &c. where from the 8. of January 1646. to this present, she remaineth in cruell restraint, being most unnaturally and tyrannically divided and divorced by a forced separation, from the comfort and society of her husband in this her afflicted condition. (7)

Notwithstanding the sexual insults she endures, Overton is less interested in offering readers a depiction of her own sexual humiliation than she is in dramatizing the means by which Parliament attempts to disenfranchise her. The tension in the scene arises primarily from the dissonance between the crowd's hurling insults at Overton, as though she were the solitary subject of their derision, and Overton's explicit construction of herself and her six-month-old baby as an aggregate subject.

The complexity of the passage becomes even more apparent when Overton's text is read in conjunction with the official record of her commitment to Bridewell as it appears in the hospital's minutes. While it is true that Overton was first arrested on the authority of the House of Lords, whose officers she describes earlier ransacking her house, her commitment to Bridewell came from the House of Commons in January 1646/7.<sup>45</sup> Knowing full well the jurisdictional and political differences between the House of Lords and the House of Commons, Overton masks this fact in her description of her journey to Bridewell, a decision that must have been purposeful. Her willful misrepresentation of the authority behind her commitment provides cover for the House of Commons, which might regain its integrity among the "commonalty." In order to facilitate that process, Overton draws her readers' attention to the nefarious ways the House of Lords sought to recruit the public to ally with the interests of privilege and prerogative. In her description, it is not the "commonalty" who reproach and discipline her "with the scandalous, infamous names of wicked Whore, Strumpet, &c.," but the "Officers" of the House of Lords who masquerade as members of the "commonalty" in order to transform those around them into the "common mob" by inciting onlookers to ignore Overton's real identity as a member of the Levellers and one of their neighbors. The crowd's misinterpretation manifests the danger implicit in the failure to privilege and attend to the collective nature of social relations and to understand thereby that authoritative meaning can only emerge from such relations. Overton's petition thus reiterates early Leveller warnings to the House of Commons that, unless they shoulder their responsibility to safeguard the collective birthright of liberty and justice, there will be no "common weal" in which the "commonalty" can share. This *disaggregation* of the commonalty, as Overton illustrates, transforms it into a mob that not only embraces the salacious accusations of aristocratic interests but also underscores through that injustice the need for collective political authority.

45. Entry for January 1646, Minutes of the Court of Governors, Bridewell and Bethlem Hospital, vol. 9, BCB-09 Series Box Number Co4/3, p. 289, Bethlem Museum of the Mind Archives, Beckenham, Kent.

### Beyond 1647

Leveller wives held a place on England's political stage only briefly. After the persecutions of 1646/47, they would never again wield such influence. The causes of their disappearance are likely multiple. With the release of William Larner, Richard Overton, and John Lilburne from prison over the course of 1647, the need for their wives to speak out publicly on behalf of their families' plights was diminished, though it did not disappear entirely. Certainly, the disdainful and sometimes violent responses Ellen Larner, Elizabeth Lilburne, and Mary Overton encountered, and the suffering they endured—Ellen Larner's miscarriage, the physical assaults on Elizabeth Lilburne, the assault on Mary Overton and the death of her infant in Bridewell—may have persuaded them that discreet participation was better. What remains indisputable is that the women's petitions both enriched and familiarized the Leveller commitment to collectivity, extending its reach as a hermeneutics as well as a politics. Cromwell successfully denied the Levellers a seat on the Council of State, but for all his maneuverings, he failed to mitigate their formative influence on political thinking. On January 4, 1648/49, the House of Commons was forced to embrace the Levellers' foundational point that legitimate political authority resided with the collective People and the People alone:

Resolved, &c. That the Commons of *England*, in Parliament assembled, do *Declare*, That the People are, under God, the Original of all just Power:

And do also *Declare*, That the Commons of *England*, in Parliament assembled, being chosen by, and representing the People, have the Supreme Power in this Nation.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps emboldened by Parliament's adoption of this principle, women affiliated with the Leveller movement achieved their apotheosis in the women's broadside petition of May 1649, when the Leveller leaders were charged with treason. This time, however, they spoke collectively, claiming their "share in the Freedoms of this Commonwealth."<sup>47</sup> Though their individual names never appear as authors in public again, the Leveller wives of 1646–47 left an indelible mark on the shape of political complaint and radical knowledge.

Have we not an equal interest with the men of this Nation, in those liberties and securities, contained in the Petition of Right, and other the good Lawes of the Land? are any of our lives, limbs, liberties or goods to be

46. *Journal of the House of Commons*, vol. 5, 1646–1648, January 4, 1648/49 (p. 111), available at *British History Online*, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=25560>.

47. *To the Supreme Authority of England The commons Assembled in Parliament. The Humble Petition of divers well-affected Women, of the Cities of London and Westminster, the Borough of Southwark, Hamblets, and Parts Adjacent. Affecters and Approvers of the Petition of Sept. 11. 1648* (London, May 5, 1649).

taken from us more then from Men, but by due processe of Law, and conviction of twelve sworn men of the Neighbourhood?

Embracing their status as neighbors, the women of this petition replicate the paradigm of collectivity ventured three years earlier with startling accuracy:

Would you have us keep at home in our houses, when men of such faithfulness and integrity as the FOUR PRISONERS our freinds in the *Tower*, are fetcht out of their beds, and forced out of their Houses by Souldiers, to the affrighting and undoing of themselves, their wives, children, and families? Are not our husbands, or selves, our children and families by the same rule, as lyable to the like unjust cruelties as they?

Clearly, these are not women who shrink from political activism; nor are they women who accept two sets of rules—one for men, one for women; nor are they women who see their proper place as their home. Indeed, in the face of injustice, they find their “houses . . . worse then Prisons.” They are “friends” to the men in the Tower, as Overton’s readers were his “friends” in 1646, and those who had supported Parliament against the king in the first civil war were friends to the House of Commons.

There is ample evidence indicating that Leveller women were both materially and ideologically integral to the movement’s foundational emphasis on collectivity. Their intermittent appearances in pamphlets, broadsides, and the parliamentary record worked to draw the affective contours of collectivity as a political principle. Their participation further invited readers to embrace collectivity hermeneutically as an effective method for producing dissident political knowledge. With few exceptions, their contributions do not appear as single-source narratives but require readers to create meaning from different discursive modalities across time and space. While such practices may have made the process of grasping Levellerism and the community that supported it more strenuous, the hermeneutics of collectivity may also have kept that community safe for longer than it might otherwise have been.

Given the experiences she shared with other Leveller women during the years of persecution, it is no wonder that Elizabeth Lilburne’s petition of 1658/59 is so obviously marked by a similar sense of self-possession. She approached Richard Cromwell as a woman in financial distress but not as a “weaker vessel” or a helpless victim. Though only summarized in the *Calendar of State Papers*, Elizabeth’s petition demonstrates that her perspective was not wholly dominated by her distress. Wearing by events, she nonetheless writes as a woman with formidable command of the facts of the case and considerable insight into both her rights and her entitlement to further recourse to Parliament, should Richard Cromwell prove unwilling to fulfill his father’s promises. She writes as someone who appreciates her share in the “common equity.”



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