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JOHN WESLEY'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS WIFE AS REVEALED IN HIS CORRESPONDENCE

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It is well known in Methodist circles that John Wesley, although remarkably sensitive to the female character, was hardly content in marriage. His thirty-year relationship with Mary Vazeille, a wealthy merchant's widow, fostered intense emotional and psychological pain both for him and for her. With the notable exception of Frederick Mills, in the past, scholars have put the lion's share of the blame for this faulted marriage on Mary Wesley but not on John. Southey, for instance, placed Mrs. Wesley alongside of Xanthippe and Job's wife as "the three outstanding examples of the world's bad women."[1] Similarly, Curnock, an earlier editor of Wesley's journal, accused her of "temporary insanity,"[2] and Luke Tyerman, perhaps the harshest of all, portrayed the wife, among other things, as a "faithless woman."[3] Nevertheless, though the marital relationship was not pleasing to either party, it was, in fact, much more complicated than this previous scholarship has recognized—or has been willing to admit. Consequently, a critical reassessment of this whole matter is warranted—an assessment which will break out of the usual hagiographic molds to discern Wesley's often troubling contribution.

Perhaps the best way to display the basic contours of this relationship as it developed is to examine the correspondence which Wesley addressed to his wife as well as to explore the references to Mary (Molly) Wesley which surfaced in letters directed to other people. Admittedly, such an approach highlights John Wesley's perspective; nevertheless, his letters (and journal) contain important clues concerning the dynamics of the relationship of which the Methodist leader himself was apparently not fully aware. These letters, therefore, remain both quite revealing and valuable. Moreover, in order to display the changing character of this marriage, the correspondence will be divided into four major periods: 1) From June,

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[1]Frederick H. Mills, "Wesley's Wife in Wesley's Letters," *Wesley Historical Society* 21 (Spring 1938): 120.

[2]Nehemiah Curnock, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols. (London: The Epworth Press, 1938), 6:170n.

[3]Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.* 3 vols. (New York: Burt Franklin), 3:233.

1750 to April, 1752 (Inordinate Affection and the Work of the Lord); 2) From May, 1752 to August, 1764 (Distrust, Jealousy, and Purloined Letters); 3) September, 1764 to August, 1774 (The Growing Rift); and 4) From September, 1774 to October, 1781 (Final Departure). After this material is presented, a few conclusions will be drawn with respect to the character of both Mary and John Wesley.

Inordinate Affection and the Work of the Lord: June, 1750 to April, 1752

Actually, Wesley teetered on the edge of marriage two times before he took his vows with Mary Vazeille in February, 1751. On one occasion, while in Georgia (1736–1737), this over-thirty Anglican priest had won the affections, at least for a time, of an eighteen year old named Sophey Hopkey, the niece of Thomas Causton, the chief magistrate of Savannah. However, Wesley's romantic behavior at this time was erratic, complicated by intermittent bouts of passion for this young woman which were then countervailed by his own strong sense of vocation. "I am resolved, Miss Sophey," Wesley wrote in his journal, "if I marry at all, not to do it till I have been among the Indians."[4] And elsewhere in his journal, the Oxford don listed another reason why it was not expedient for him to wed; namely, that he was not strong enough to bear "the complicated temptations of a married state."[5]

Beyond these objections to nuptial arrangements, the imagery which Wesley employed in his journal to describe the tension, the ambivalence, and the outright perplexity which he felt as he wrestled with his "inordinate affection" and his ministerial call is most revealing: marriage is presented as a trap, a snare, which prevents one from following the will of God in its highest sense. Indeed, reflecting on a *tete-a-tete* with Sophey, Wesley quotes a line reminiscent of his deliverance from the parsonage fire of 1709: "I looked upon her, and should have said too much, had we had a moment longer. But in the instant, Mrs. Causton called us in. So I was once more 'snatched as a brand out of the fire.'"[6] And the very next day he utilized an equally graphic image to describe his romantic predicament: ". . . all these things were against me. And I lay struggling in the net: nay, scarcely struggling—as even fearing to be delivered."[7] Little wonder that John and Ms. Hopkey never tied the knot.

During the spring and early summer of 1749, while on a preaching tour in Ireland, Wesley came even closer to marriage and actually entered into a contract *de praesenti* with Grace Murray, the housekeeper of his

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[4]W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *The Works of John Wesley* Vol. 18 *Journals of Diaries I* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), p. 472.
[5]Ward and Heitzenrater, 18:471.
[6]Ward and Heitzenrater, 18:482.
[7]Ward and Heitzenrater, 18:482–83.

Orphan House.[8] By this time, many—though certainly not all—of his objections to marriage had withered away, and he now reasoned that he needed "a companion and nurse and a bulwark against emotional females and scandal."[9] More importantly, the Methodist leader considered that Grace would be quite useful in the service of God, especially in the care of the Methodist societies. At any rate, this marriage too was not to be. The naivete of Wesley who entrusted Grace Murray to a rival suitor and her eventual husband, John Bennet, the machinations of his brother Charles who was determined "to save" the Methodist societies and to see to it that his brother would not marry a commoner,[10] and the ambivalence of Grace Murray, herself, all undermined the prospect of marriage. Once again, John Wesley had been frustrated in love.

Certain elements of Wesley's courting style, but certainly not his prior hesitating manner, were to continue as he developed a relationship with Mary Vazeille, the widow of a prosperous London trader. The first extant letter of John Wesley to this middle-aged widow was written on June 19, 1750, a little over eight months after John Bennet married Grace Murray. However, this first piece of correspondence is undistinguished in many respects and simply contains counsel concerning such topics as horseback riding and conversing "with those in various parts who know and love God."[11] More to the point, the letter offers little clue of Wesley's later affection for this woman or of what was to follow shortly.

On February 2, 1751, after receiving the approval of Vincent Perronet, vicar of Shoreham, Kent, and confidant, Wesley decided to marry Mrs. Vazeille, and the next day he offered the following justification in his journal: "For many years I remained single, because I believed I could be more useful in a single than in a married state. . . . I now as fully believed that in my present circumstances I might be more useful in a married state."[12] And though, this time at least, Wesley was obviously determined to be married, this still did not diminish his high valuation of the single life. On February 6, for example, he ironically wrote:

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[8]Frank Baker, "John Wesley's First Marriage," *London Quarterly and Holborn Review* 192 (October 1967): 305–315. Baker puts forth the interesting thesis that Wesley's formal engagement to Grace Murray in Dublin was legally binding and therefore this constitutes his first marriage.

[9]Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), 265.

[10]Curnock examines Charles Wesley's less-than-honorable role in the Grace Murray affair and makes the following pointed observation: "Too late Charles Wesley discovered that he had persuaded John Bennet to marry his brother's fiancee, and had led Grace to believe that 'the important person' who had steadfastly loved her for ten years had actually expressed the wish that, for the sake of the work of God, she would marry another." Cf. *Journal*, 3:440n.

[11]Frank Baker, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol 26 *Letters I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 429.

[12]Curnock, *Journal*, 3:512.

> I met the single men, and showed them on how many accounts it was good for those who had received that gift from God to remain 'single for the kingdom of heaven's sake'; unless where a particular case might be an exception to the general rule.[13]

When Charles Wesley learned of his brother's design, he was shocked and angry. "I was thunderstruck," he complained in his journal, "and could only answer, he had given me the first blow, and his marriage would come like the *coup de grace*."[14] And in an even more self-righteous vein, Charles refused his brother's company at chapel and "retired to mourn with [his] faithful Sally."[15] Though at first glance, it appears that the younger brother's behavior was both ill mannered and impetuous, Charles actually had some very good reasons for his actions. First of all, Charles was already acquainted with Mary Vazeille—he seems to have been introduced to her at Edward Perronet's in July, 1749[16] and he considered her to be "a woman of sorrowful spirit."[17] Beyond this, and more significantly, Charles was disturbed that John apparently was willing to set aside one of the rules of the Holy Club which governed the procedures when a minister or assistant desired to marry. To be sure, one of the 'Twelve Rules of a Helper' was to "Take no steps towards marriage without first consulting with your brethren."[18] And though John had earlier told Grace Murray that he could not marry her until he, among other things, procured his brother's consent and sent an "Account of the reasons on which [he] proceeded, to every Helper and every Society in England . . .,"[19] he obviously was unwilling to be bound by such precepts any longer.

But perhaps the greatest fear of Charles was that, through marriage, John's labors in the Evangelical Revival would be greatly curtailed, perhaps as much as his own had been through his marriage to Sally Gwynne, the daughter of Squire Marmaduke Gwynne of Garth.[20] The import of all this, of course, was that Mary Vazeille soon came to learn that the dearest friend of her fiancee despised the very hint of his marriage. This was hardly an auspicious beginning!

In time, however, Charles had little choice but to be reconciled to his brother and to accept the *fait accompli* which occurred on either

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[13]Curnock, 3:512.

[14]Thomas Jackson, *The Journal of The Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.* 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1980), 2:78.

[15]Jackson, *Journal*, 2:78. Bracketed material is mine.

[16]Tyerman, *Life and Times*, 2:101.

[17]Tyerman, 2:101.

[18]Curnock, *Journal*, 3:421n.

[19]Curnock, 3:421n.

[20]Tyerman, *Life and Times*, 2:103. Curnock, for his part, offers the following assessment of Charles' behavior: "As in the Grace Murray episode, so now, it was Charles Wesley's want of tact and prudence, of calm wisdom, of strong self-control, in a word, his temperamental weakness, that aggravated a difficult situation, if it did not entirely account for the trouble that followed." Cf. Curnock, *Journal*, 3:514n.

February 18 or 19 in the year 1751.[21] Whereas earlier John Wesley had been hesitating and cautious in the Hopkey and Murray affairs, now he was quick, bold, and determined (some might even argue reckless), perhaps unwilling to be frustrated yet again in love. Interestingly, it was an odd turn of events which hastened the marriage, for initially Wesley had planned to set out on a northern preaching tour, beginning February 11. However, the preceding day he slipped on London Bridge and sprained his ankle badly, was shortly thereafter taken to Mr. Blackwell's home, and then to that of Mrs. Vazeille to convalesce.[22] Ever mindful of redeeming the time (a habit he learned from Jeremy Taylor), and since his preaching tour was precluded for the moment, Wesley pushed up the date.

Remarkably, Wesley's journal mentions nothing of the marriage, nor is it clear that the newlyweds had much time to themselves before the pressing needs of the revival dictated their schedules. Though married, Wesley was not about to curtail his ministry in the least. The Lord's work was not to be slighted. In fact, about a month after the wedding, on March 19, 1751, the Methodist leader observed in his journal:

> I cannot understand how a Methodist preacher can answer it to God to preach one sermon or travel one day less in a married than in a single state. In this respect surely 'it remaineth that they who have wives be as though they had none.'[23]

Prudently or not, Wesley also expressed these same sentiments to his wife and on one occasion noted: "If I thought, my dear, I should have to travel or preach less, as well as I love you I would never see your face more."[24] But the Methodist leader was not only preoccupied with his own continuing resourcefulness, but with that of his wife as well as demonstrated in the first letter which he wrote to her after their marriage. In it, he questions Mary as he would one of his preachers or assistants:

> Do not you forget the poor? Have you visited the prison? My dear, be not angry that I put you upon so much work. *I want you to crowd all your life with the work of faith and the labour of love.* How can we ever do enough for him that has done and suffered so much for us? Are not you willing to suffer also for him?[25]

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[21]Baker, *Letters*, 26:450n. Baker also notes that on February 9, 1751 "John Wesley and Mary Vazeille signed a marriage agreement stipulating that he would touch none of her private fortune, and that she must not be held responsible for any of his debts." This action would, no doubt, undermine the charge that Wesley married Mrs. Vazeille for her money.

[22]Baker, 26:450.

[23]Curnock, *Journal*, 3:517.

[24]Edwards, "Reluctant Lover," 60.

[25]Baker, *Letters*, 26:451-52. The theme of ministry also dominates the second letter of Wesley to his wife after his marriage: "O how can we praise God enough for making us helps meet for each other! I am utterly astonished at his goodness." Cf. Baker, *Letters*, 26:453. Emphasis is mine.

Though the early letters are often hortatory in tone, genuine affection does emerge in them, and the following sample from this correspondence epitomizes Wesley's sentiments for his wife:

> How is it that absence does not lessen but increase [sic] my affection? I feel you every day nearer to my heart. O that God may continue his unspeakable gift![26] (4/2/'51)
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> Last night I had the pleasure of receiving two letters from my dearest earthly friend. I can't answer them till I tell you how I love you—though you knew it before.[27] (4/7/'51)
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> I think you might have found a better husband. But Oh! where could I have found so good a wife? If I was not to bless God, surely the stones would cry out![28] (4/7/'51)

And in language that is perhaps more typical of an adolescent caught up in the first flush of love, Wesley wrote: "Love is talkative. Therefore I can't wait any longer. For it is two weeks since I wrote the former part of my last letter."[29] However, such expressions of tenderness were kept in check (so that they would not become "inordinate") by the rejoinder: "O what a mystery is this! That I am enabled to give you up to God without one murmuring or uneasy thought!"[30] The love of a creature, in other words, had to be subsumed under the yet higher love of God.

Distrust, Jealousy, and Purloined Letters: May, 1752 to August, 1764

Life with an eighteenth century Anglican priest was not without its privations, and those women who sought more material comforts chose men of other professions.[31] But if that priest were also an itinerant evangelist like Wesley, it would take a woman of the highest character and dedication, willing to make many sacrifices, in order to make marriage to such a man work. At the outset, Mary Wesley demonstrated considerable resolve and accompanied her husband on his long northern journey two weeks after their wedding. Moreover, in August, 1751 she went with him to Cornwall, and in March, 1752 she shared the burden of a three months' journey to the north of England.[32] In one incident, in April, 1752, John and Mary Wesley scurried to a waiting coach in Hull as the mob peppered the carriage with rocks and insults.[33] And of his wife's

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[26]Baker, 26:456.
[27]Baker, 26:457.
[28]Baker, 26:457.
[29]Baker, 26:462.
[30]Baker, 26:455. Immediately preceding these lines, Wesley had written: "I can imagine then I am sitting just by you, and see and hear you all the while, softely speak and sweetly smile." Wesley also curbed his sentiments, as revealed in a letter to his wife on May 22, 1752, by his rejection of levity and laughter. "I ought always to speak seriously and weightily with you, as I would with my guardian angel." Cf. Baker, *Letters*, 26:493–94.
[31]Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 201ff.
[32]Tyerman, *Life and Times*, 2:108.
[33]Curnock, *Journal*, 4:21.

future usefulness in ministry, Wesley waxed optimistic in a letter to Ebenezer Blackwell in 1752: "the more she travels the better she bears it. It gives us yet another proof that whatever God calls us to He will fit us for."[34]

But all was not well. Perhaps the pace was too rapid or the respites were not long enough. At any rate, the first indication of Mary's exasperation concerning itinerancy is evident in a letter which Wesley sent to Ebenezer Blackwell, a mutual friend, in May, 1752. In it, Wesley mentions that his wife, at least, believed that some of the travel plans arranged by him were a "trick concerted between [his] brother and [him] in order to prevent her coming to Leeds."[35] This measure of distrust in her husband was also followed by public displays of temper and bad manners, most notably during the encounter with John Bennet in 1752 in which Mary Wesley told him that he was "the gall of bitterness, bond of iniquity . . . ."[36] Nevertheless, Mary continued to travel with her husband during this period, albeit less enthusiastically perhaps than in the past.[37]

A far more serious problem in the relationship emerged over Mary's irritating habit of reading her husband's letters, some of which were written to females. The first hint of trouble appeared in 1755 when correspondence directed to Charles Perronet fell into Ms. Wesley's hands.[38] But this was not yet a major blow nor did it dampen Wesley's love for his wife as demonstrated by the letter he wrote to her on April 24, 1757. "I see plainly, my dear Molly," Wesley exclaims, "you are resolved to make me love you better and better. . . . This is one of the talents God has given you."[39] However, at least by May, 1757, Wesley's attitude had changed, for he then instructed Mr. Blackwell to be sure that none of his letters fell into Molly's hands.[40]

Actually, Wesley had given his wife permission to open any letters addressed to him, a liberty which he later regretted.[41] But he at no point gave her license to search his pockets, something which Molly did on January 20, 1758 when she found a letter written by John earlier that day to Sarah Ryan. And though Ms. Wesley's action was unjustified, a clear invasion of privacy, the letter which she discovered in her husband's pocket

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[34]Telford, *Letters*, 3:87.
[35]Telford, *Letters*, 3:127. Bracketed material is mine.
[36]Rack, *Ethusiast*, 266.
[37]Two of the more prominent references to travel are found in the journal entries of March 16, 1753, "I returned to Bristol, and on Monday the 19th set out with my wife for the north," and on May 12, 1755, "We rode (my wife and I) to Northhallerton." Cf. Curnock, *Journal*, 4:55 and 4:115.
[38]Telford, *Letters*, 3:140.
[39]Telford, 3:213.
[40]Telford, 3:216.
[41]Rack, *Enthusiast*, 265.

was incautious in its expressions and revealed an intimacy often reserved for husband and wife. Wesley wrote:

> The conversing with you, either by speaking or writing, is an unspeakable blessing to me. I cannot think of you without thinking of God. Others often lead me to Him; but it is, as it were, going round about: you bring me straight into His presence.[42]

Later in another installment to Ms. Ryan, Wesley expressed doubt whether he had done well in writing to her at all.[43] But after prayer, the doubt was marvelously taken away. But if Wesley had little question about the appropriateness of his actions, his wife clearly did not and abruptly left him on January 20, 1758, but only for a couple of days. This was to be the first of a series of departures in an increasingly sour relationship.

Another element which exacerbated communication between Wesley and his wife was the alleged evil speaking on Mary's part and the defensiveness on John's. For instance, Wesley complained in a letter to Blackwell on June 5, 1758 that his wife had turned their domestic help against him with her gossip, and he added, no doubt with some measure of exasperation: "I should not at all wonder if my brother and you were brought over to the same opinion."[44] To be sure, so concerned was Wesley with Blackwell's opinion of him in the face of his wife's charges that he penned a letter to this gentleman the next month, a letter in which he methodically addressed allegations which included the by-now-familiar Sarah Ryan, but also Sarah Crosby, a class leader at the Foundery in London.

Failing to achieve any real measure of mutual understanding, the couple continued to squabble throughout 1758 and 1759. Mary accused John of "unkindness and cruelty,"[45] while John responded in kind by charging his wife with an assortment of evils which culminated in a lengthy letter on October 23, 1759. In this piece, Wesley indicated, among other things, that he did not want his wife to show, read, or touch his letters any more, that he wished to have, as he put it, "command of his own house," that he be permitted the liberty to associate with whom he pleased, and that his wife speak no evil behind his back.[46]

Though this last letter is, no doubt, interesting for its contents, it is perhaps even more interesting for what it does *not* contain. Wesley, for example, never once considered his wife's perspective in this piece; instead, he methodically enumerated ten problems concerning Mary's behavior to

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[42]Telford, *Letters*, 4:4.

[43]Telford, *Letters*, 4:4. Though Wesley signed his two letters to Sarah Ryan (January 20, 1758 and January 27, 1758) "Your affectionate brother," not much should be made of this practice, since it was quite normal for him when writing to females.

[44]Telford, 4:21.

[45]Telford, 4:49.

[46]Telford, 4:76–77.

which he then offered the ten requisite solutions. But the questions remain. Why did his wife search his pockets, open his drawers, and rifle his papers?[47] Why did she talk with Mr. Blackwell and others during Wesley's many absences? And why would she not tolerate a defense of her husband's actions by his friends? Did Mary Wesley see aspects of her husband's character (self-righteousness, coldness, neglect, and defensiveness) that others, too enamored of his labors, did not? Indeed, Mills calls this last installment of October 23 by Wesley nothing less than "rude."[48]

If the subsequent letters (from 1760–1761) are any clue, Wesley now vacillated in his approach to his wife. On the one hand, he could be conciliatory, as in the letter of July, 1760 in which he writes: "My desire is to live peaceably with all men; with *you* in particular."[49] But, on the other hand, in an earlier letter that year, Wesley was unyielding and stressed eighteenth-century notions of a husband's prerogatives, in particular, the obedience owed to him by his wife. He wrote:

> Indeed, if you was a wise, whether a good woman or not, you would long since have given me a *carte blanche*: you would have said, 'Tell me what to do and I will do it; tell me what to avoid, and I will avoid it. I promised to *obey* you, and I will keep my word. Bid me do *anything, everything*. In whatever is not sinful, I *obey. You direct*, I will follow the direction.'[50]

Ever in control of the burgeoning Methodist infrastructure, created to foster the revival, Wesley, oddly enough, approached his marriage with the same managerial style and attempted to resolve his problems with Mary by placing her utterly under his control. This would be a simple solution of the matter and the one which Wesley apparently preferred. In fact, he compared his right to obedience from Mary with her own right to obedience from her son, Noah Vazeille—a comparison distasteful in most any age and one which was sure to roil his wife. To make matters worse, Wesley considered every act of disobedience on Mary's part to be an act of rebellion against "God and the King, as well as against your affectionate husband."[51] Such a position left little room for compromise and made Wesley's later remarks, "Now, Molly, let us set out: Let us walk hand in hand to Immanuel's land,"[52] appear almost pathetic in their insensitivity.

Next year, in 1761, in letter to James Rouquet, Wesley intimated that since he had been wronged in the theft of his papers, *he* was now entitled

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[47]For additional references to Wesley's claim that his wife was stealing his letters Cf. Telford, *Letters*, 4:53 (March 2, 1759); 4:61 (April 9, 1759); and 4:62 (April 9, 1759).
[48]Mills, "Wesley's Wife," 124.
[49]Telford, *Letters*, 4:101.
[50]Telford, 4:89.
[51]Telford, 4:89.
[52]Telford, 4:102. In this letter on July 12, 1760, Wesley was at least sensitive enough to list some of his wife's better qualities such as her indefatigable industry, frugality, neatness and cleanliness, and patience in attending the sick, among other things.

to open his wife's bureau and to take what was his own.[53] Beyond this, he related that he judged his wife's case to be a "proper lunacy; but it is a preternatural, a diabolical lunacy . . .[54]—a view with which Telford, among others, concurs.[55] However, it should be borne in mind that before her marriage to Wesley, Mary had lived quite contentedly with her first husband, Anthony Vazeille, and gave no indication of the mental illness of which she was later accused. Moreover, her mental state after her final departure from Wesley's orbit appeared to be good and she was well spoken of by her friends—elements which suggest a closer examination of the dynamics of the Wesley household.

The Growing Rift (September, 1764 to September, 1774)

The correspondence of the period from 1764 to the latter part of 1768 suggests that Wesley's marriage was healing and that a resolution of its many problems was, after all, possible. In a letter to Ann Foard, for example, Wesley praised his wife and remarked that her strong faith profited him exceedingly.[56] And a few years later, in 1766, John wrote to his brother Charles and indicated that his wife "continues in amazing temper . . . not one jarring string."[57] But the relative tranquility of this period was soon to evaporate in the wake of an incident which occurred in August, 1768 when Mary took ill. Upon learning of his wife's poor condition, Wesley immediately set out for the Foundery where Mary was staying, but he remained there only an hour once he determined that her fever had broken. He then headed towards Bristol to more work and, of course, to more ministry. In a letter to his wife the next month, Wesley reflected on this incident and made a telling comparison: "I remember when it was my own case at this very place," he wrote, "and when you spared no pains in nursing and waiting upon me, till it pleased God to make you the chief instrument of restoring my strength."[58] Mary Wesley had *nursed* John; he, on the other hand, saw fit to spend very little time at her side.[59]

Indeed, that Wesley was not completely aware of the full import of the very comparison he had made is revealed in his puzzlement over his wife's departure, once again, a few months later. During this separation, which ended sometime between late January, 1770 and January, 1771,[60]

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[53]Telford, 4:143.
[54]Telford, 4:143.
[55]Telford, 3:210.
[56]Telford, 4:265.
[57]Telford, 5:21.
[58]Telford, 5:105.
[59]Admittedly, when Wesley left for Bristol, he was heading for his conference which would begin two days later on Tuesday the 16th, but this still does not justify remaining only one hour at the Foundery; the schedule was simply not that tight.
[60]Mills, "Wesley's Wife," 122.

Wesley wrote to some of his friends concerning his wife in letters which are noteworthy for their cool and indifferent spirit. "If she will return of her own accord," he wrote to Christopher Hopper, "I will receive her with open arms. But I will not hire her to return. I think that would be foolish, nay sinful."[61] And to Mary Bosanquet, the wife of the saintly John Fletcher, he complained: "She [Mary Wesley] is there still; and likely so to be, unless I would *hire* her to return, which I dare not do."[62] And with a touch of sarcasm he added: "I will not buy a cross, though I can bear it."[63] Moreover, when his wife left yet again on January 23, 1771, proposing never to return (though she did), Wesley wryly retorted in his journal: "*Non eam reliqui; non dimisi; non revocabo*" (I have not left her. I have not sent her away; I will not recall her).[64]

It should be evident by now that this troubled relationship went through a number of cycles of separation and return, and in June, 1772, John and Mary were once again together in relative peace. During the next couple of years, for instance, Mary traveled with her husband and lived with him at their homes in Bristol and Newcastle.[65] As expected, the letters of this period reflect this change and contain some of the highest praise that Wesley ever showered on his wife. In July, 1772, Wesley wrote the following to his brother Charles: "In these fifty years, I do not remember to have seen such a change. She is now [one full of graces, honey quite unmixed]."[66] By June, 1774, praise was still evident in Wesley's comments to his wife, but it was now mixed with the old complaint of evil speaking as demonstrated in the following:

> Your behaviour as to the money was admirable. You did yourself much honour thereby. You behaved like a woman of honour, sense, and conscience. O why should not you behave so in everything? . . . Commit your cause unto the Lord, and speak nothing against me behind my back.[67]

Furthermore, in a letter the next month (July 15, 1774), Wesley imprudently decided to rehash nearly all the faults of his wife from the time of their wedding some twenty-three years earlier to the present. Naturally, the incidents surrounding Sarah Ryan and Sarah Crosby were recounted in some detail as was Mary's practice of opening her husband's letters. Perhaps Wesley opened these old wounds in this letter, which rivals the

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[61]Telford, *Letters*, 5:161.

[62]Telford, 5:176. Bracketed marterial is mine.

[63]Telford, 5:176.

[64]Curnock, *Journal*, 5:400. One of the more colorful incidents in Wesley's marriage was when he fled the house in Newcastle and hopped over a back fence to avoid his wife who had just entered the front door. Cf. Rack, *Enthusiast*, 266.

[65]Curnock, *Journal*, 5:474n.

[66]Telford, *Letters*, 5:330. Bracketed material is Telford's translation of the Greek phrase Wesley wrote.

[67]Telford, 6:90.

one of October 23, 1759 for its insensitivity and rudeness, because he wanted to give added force to the letter's conclusion that a wife should be utterly humble, insignificant, and governed by her husband—the only solution to his marital discord that Wesley was, once again, willing to recognize. As in the past, the Methodist leader cautioned his wife:

> Do not any longer contend for mastery, for power, money, or praise. Be content to be a private, insignificant person, known and loved by God and me. Attempt no more to abridge me of the liberty which I claim by the laws of God and man. Leave *me* to be governed by God and my own conscience. Then shall I govern *you* with gentle sway . . ."[58]

This was hardly a prescription for success, for such appeals had not worked in the past; they would not work now.

Final Departure (September, 1774 to October, 1781)

In September 1774, Mary left John Wesley for the last time and never did return. This cycle, at least, had been broken. And it is perhaps no accident that this departure occurred shortly after her husband's most recent indicting letter, although the exact reason is not known. At any rate, Wesley was evidently pleased with this turn of events as indicated by his calm account of the matter to, of all people, Sarah Crosby on September 26, 1774:

> While I was in Wales my *best friend* (as my brother terms her) went to London, and has hired part of an house in Hoxton, professing she would never more set foot in Bristol house or in the Foundery. Good is the will of the Lord! 'I cannot choose. He cannot err.'[69]

The very last lines of this letter were unwarranted, smacked of a growing self-righteousness, and indicated, once more, Wesley's unabated preoccupation with issues of authority and obedience. Accordingly, if an appeal to his own authority as a Christian husband could not resolve the conflicts in his marriage, then perhaps the yet higher authority of God's providence would have to take its course. This line of argument was, no doubt, comforting to Wesley, though its reasoning was largely faulty.[70]

Although Mary had left her husband, this by no means put an end to their relationship, and they continued to correspond until October, 1778. One issue which surfaced in this later correspondence was Mary's poor judgment in reading some of her husband's incautious remarks found in

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[68]Telford, 6:102.

[69]Telford, 6:115. In a letter written less than a year later, Wesley inquires of his brother Charles whether Mary has taken a house in Bristol and whether or not her son, Noah, is with her. Cf. Telford, *Letters*, 6:152.

[70]The flaw in Wesley's reasoning here is that he assumes the providence of God takes into account the righteousness of his own position, and by implication, the unrighteousness of his wife's. However, Mary's perspective must somehow be factored into this equation as well.

his papers to some of his opponents, namely, the Calvinistic Methodists—a group which had already become estranged from Wesley earlier that decade.[71] And though the incident began in 1775, it does not appear in the extant correspondence until 1777 at which time Wesley complained:

> Likewise you have spoken all manner of evil against me, particularly to my enemies and the enemies of the cause I live to support. Hereby many bad men have triumphed and been confirmed in their evil ways; . . . A sword has been put into the hands of the enemies of God, and the children of God have been armed against one another.[72]

In past separations, when Mary had fled the Wesley home, John was willing to allow her to return whenever she pleased and without stipulation, but this was no longer the case. Indeed, in the same letter in which the Methodist leader criticized his wife's actions, he also laid down three conditions which had to be met before she could return: (1) restore his papers; (2) promise to take no more; (3) retract what she had said against him.[73] Mary had left easily in the past; she could no longer easily return. Forgiveness was now laden with conditions.

Continuing this line of thought, the very last letter which Wesley wrote to his wife was in no way conciliatory. The Oxonian saw too clearly the injustices done to him to be aware of his wife's own grievances. Sadly, the letter is composed of little more than a repetition of past charges and it concluded with an even larger condition for return: "If you were to live a thousand years," Wesley declared to his wife, "you could not undo the mischief that you have done. And till you have done all you can towards it, I bid you farewell."[74] Conditions or not, Mary was not about to return, for she too had crossed her own threshold in the relationship. The years of travel, relative neglect, and life with an authoritarian, and at times self-righteous, husband had taken their toll.[75]

When Mary Wesley died a few years later on October 8, 1781, John was not immediately informed, and he, consequently, did not attend her funeral. But one suspects that even if Wesley had been aware of the time and place of the service, he would not have attended anyway—a suspicion strengthened by the observation that his wife's death left "no ripple on the correspondence."[76] The last breach, regrettably, had been that wide.

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[71]Tyerman accused Mary Wesley of forgery, perfidy, and meanness in this incident, but Curnock contends that Tyerman has exaggerated the whole affair. Cf. Tyerman, *Life and Times*, 3:233; and Curnock, *Journal*, 6:89n.

[72]Telford, *Letters*, 6:273–74.

[73]Telford, *Letters*, 6:273–74. In this letter, John indicates that Mary has accused him of adultery—a charge which is utterly without foundation. For more of this allegation Cf. Rack, *Enthusiast*, 266.

[74]Telford, *Letters*, 6:322.

[75]Mr. William Smith, even at this late date, attempted to reconcile the parties, but to no avail. "I had to leave matters no better than I found them. It is, indeed, a melancholy affair, and, I am afraid, productive of bad consequences." Cf. Curnock, *Journal*, 6:246n.

[76]Telford, *Letters*, 6:368.

Conclusion

It is not the intention of this piece to suggest that Mary Wesley was a saint, nor is it fruitful to paint a portrait of her which will bear little relation to the historical record. Mary's shortcomings were, after all, both real and serious, especially her jealousy, fits of temper, and her numerous departures. Nevertheless, these elements need to be interpreted in light of her many good qualities for the sake of accuracy and balance—qualities which Wesley, himself, in his candor had acknowledged. In particular, the Oxonian wrote of Mary's indefatigable industry, her frugality, neatness, cleanliness, and her patience in attending the sick.[77] And while Tyerman admits, somewhat reluctantly perhaps, that Wesley's wife "appeared to be truly pious and was very agreeable in her person"[78] and while Telford, likewise, concedes that she was "in many ways a generous hearted woman,"[79] the reader often gets the impression that these scholars are uncomfortable with such descriptions.

But what of John Wesley, himself? How had he contributed to the demise of this marriage? Curnock, in his notes on the journal, admits that the Methodist leader married in haste, but this is virtually the extent of his criticism. And Tyerman, for his part, makes this same observation but then adds that Wesley would have been more wise if he had "refrained from writing religious letters to female members of his society."[80] But is this the entirety of Wesley's involvement in this troubled affair? Does it even constitute its most important elements? I think not for the following reasons.

First of all, though Wesley married unadvisedly and in haste, neglecting some of his own standards which he had established for his preachers, a far more serious problem emerges in Wesley's attitude towards marriage itself—a problem which was present in his earlier romantic relationships as well. Thus, his celebration of virginity, which perhaps was amplified by his reading of the early church fathers,[81] the tension which he felt between affection for women and the love of God, and his reluctance to allow the mundane concerns of his spouse in any way to interfere with the higher work of his vocation, all suggest a seriousness and a diligence which should have been left to prosper in a celibate state. Accordingly, when the Apostle Paul counseled the Corinthian church, "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do," the

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[77]Telford, 4:101.

[78]Tyerman, *Life and Times*, 2:142.

[79]Telford, *Letters*, 4:74.

[80]Tyerman, *Life and Times*, 2:114.

[81]For an excellent description of the sexual ethic of the early church fathers and its relation to the pursuit of holiness Cf. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

Apostle most probably had someone like John Wesley in mind. (1 Cor. 7:10, RSV) Indeed, in a real sense, Wesley was already married before February, 1751, but not to Grace Murray as Baker suggests. Rather, John Wesley was already married to the Lord.

The second set of Wesley's shortcomings, as reflected in his wife's complaints, grows largely out of the first. That is, a person so driven in the pursuit of ministry, like Wesley, so punctilious in his use and valuation of time, could only appear as unkind, cold, and neglectful to the suffering (and at times sick) spouse. In other words, Molly's allegations *in response* to her husband's work habits were not an instance of hysteria nor did they entail a lack of perspective. Instead, they were eminently reasonable: they are the stuff of which, even today, marriage counseling sessions are made. Clearly, Wesley's ministerial style, his particular balance of hearth and pulpit, can hardly serve as a model for contemporary married Methodist pastors.

Third, Mary's annoying practice of reading Wesley's correspondence must be considered in light of the dynamics of the relationship just described. Perhaps the relative neglect which she felt predisposed her to think the worse of John. If he was not spending suffiicent time with her, then with whom was he spending time? With Sarah Ryan? With Sarah Crosby? With others? And why were *they* so valuable? In Wesley's scheme of things, time spent revealed significant value judgments. Perhaps Mary got the message. More importantly, once the theft of the letters became an issue in the relationship, it began to function as a "red herring" for Wesley and prevented him from seeing the far deeper problem in the marriage of which the stealing was only a symptom.

And finally, Wesley's authoritarian style, his attempt to rule his wife as he ruled his societies, his neglect of dialogue and compromise in favor of demands for obedience, his tendency towards self-righteousness as he enumerated his wife's faults (in ten points!) while neglecting his own, all these ingredients contributed to the final breakdown of the relationship. In light of this, the first question is not to ask why John Wesley's marriage was unhappy. As Edwards aptly points out, "In the very nature of the case nothing else could be expected."[82] Simply put, John Wesley should have never married. The failure of his marriage, therefore, was very much his own.

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[82]Edwards, "Reluctant Lover," 58.