did not leave letters and papers that might have given his character greater depth. Still, the reader with some background in the Civil War era will find that Jones’s book provides valuable perspective on the factionalism within the ranks of the Parliamentarians.


For those scholars who fear that historical readings of literature have been drifting away from attention to language, this book should be a welcome discovery. Marcus Nevitt’s study of agency in the writings and actions of non-aristocratic Englishwomen truly breaks new ground in the study of political discourse in the revolutionary period. First, Nevitt examines the rhetoric employed in women’s pamphleteering, rather than the more feminine-gendered prophecy, as a site of negotiating female agency. Second, and perhaps more important, he challenges the disciplinary limitations of previous scholarship to argue for the importance of material culture as a significant source of evidence of women’s participation in the public sphere of political action. Through five focused case studies, or “close-analyses” (19), Nevitt discusses a range of genres and loci of female presence: animadversion, regicide pamphleteering, newsbooks, public demonstration, and petitioning. Arranging his chapters chronologically, he devotes the first, second, and fourth chapters primarily to the study of female rhetorics, the third and fifth to material culture. Such an organization clearly demonstrates the intersection of the two approaches and the importance of setting aside as artifacts of previous methods any assumptions about political or sectarian affiliations of women writers.

Before commencing his case studies, Nevitt devotes part of his introduction to presenting a model of his method in an analysis of the “performances and prophecies” (6) of the Fifth Monarchist Anna Trapnel in 1654. Following the collapse of Barebone’s Parliament in January, Trapnel took to bed for twelve days in a trance while uttering “prayers, songs and prophecies” (7). However, this episode was far from the end of the event. As Nevitt shows,
it gained significance from both Trapnel’s subsequent writings, notably *The Cry of a Stone* (1654) as well as other publications, and male mediation in an anonymous “Relator’s” effort to describe and perhaps contain Trapnel’s actions and speech-acts. The event thus demonstrates that “transformative action does not arise from a single source but is always mediated and preceded by other actions” (18). The approach thus defined and illustrated makes Nevitt’s point that the distinctive qualities of mid-seventeenth-century women’s agency demands of scholars new categories of interpretation and new sensibilities towards women’s handling of traditional polemical genres.

The first chapter discusses Katherine Chidley’s transformation of the male genre of animadversion in her pamphlet war against the militant Presbyterian Thomas Edwards (Milton’s “shallow Edwards”), author of *Gangraena*, in 1645 and 1646. As Nevitt shows, animadversion has its origins in Humanist debate, wherein writers characterized themselves as aggressive combatants doing battle with their intellectual and confessional enemies. Chidley challenges Edwards on his own grounds while subverting the conventions of the genre through an open-ended rhetoric of subtle self-effacement. In the following chapter, Nevitt alters the scholarly discussion of responses to the regicide by demonstrating how rhetorics of silence and self-effacement became gendered through the “masculinization of the political subject” (54) in republican discourse and the adoption of female figures as symbols of royalist grief.

In the fourth chapter—the last of the three chapters devoted to a rhetorical focus—Nevitt presents a distinctive modification of New Historical practice by analyzing the written male responses to the appearance of a naked, or at least partially disrobed, woman in the midst of a congregation gathered to hear a sermon by Peter Sterry, chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, in the summer of 1652. As Nevitt explains, these pamphlets illustrate “the lengths to which some male contemporaries would go to deny the very possibility of women’s goal-oriented action” (121). Male pamphleteers labeled the woman mad while criticizing Sterry’s failure to rebuke her, depicting his inaction as a dereliction of male authority. In contrast, Nevitt describes the immediate context of nude protesting as practiced by several radical groups, most notably the Quakers. Especially in light of Sterry’s connections to Cromwell, Nevitt argues, the naked woman could well have been engaged in a political act. Certainly, the rhetoric of the male pamphleteers asserted the “false universal”—the gendering
of political subjects as male.

These three chapters are balanced in length by the two that focus on material culture. It is here that Nevitt proves the significance of that approach to our understanding of revolutionary political discourse. Chapter three presents a fascinating picture of the underappreciated Elizabeth Alkin, known to her detractors as “Parliament Joan.” The widow of a Parliamentary spy hanged by royalists, Alkin was active in her own right as a petitioner and spy. Most noteworthy, however, were Alkin’s activities in 1650 as a writer and publisher of newsbooks. Most newsbooks were distinguished by the distinctive, male voices of their authors, argues Nevitt. Further, many used salacious verbal images of women to enliven their copy. However, the few newsbooks published by Alkin employed a more neutral, collective voice that emphasized the reporting of events rather than the representation of opinion, and reflected the truly collaborative nature of the newly developing profession of journalism.

The final, fifth chapter examines the participation of Quaker women in petitioning against tithes in 1659. In a perceptive survey of the history of opposition to tithes, Nevitt demonstrates how anti-tithe petitioning was recognized, like the genre of animadversion, as a male activity. Employing great learning and the rhetoric of combat, tithe petitions typically enforced the false universal of the male political subject. And Quaker women usually avoided the issue. The petitions of 1659 were a notable exception. While Leveller women had petitioned in the 1640s and early 50s, the form rapidly became a vehicle for antifeminist satire in such pamphlets as The Maids Petition (1647). The Quaker women reclaimed the petition with a significant innovation: the publishing of the names of all the signatories. As Nevitt explains, “The Quaker women’s insistence on the material importance of the printed ciphers representing every one of their names ... gives the work an innovative substantiality ... and impels it as far away from individualistic, competitive models of authorship as is conceivably possible” (172). Simultaneously self-effacing, collaborative, and assertive, Quaker women’s anti-tithe petitions reclaimed, if only briefly, women’s claims on the public sphere.

This is a handsomely produced volume. Many readers will appreciate the fact that the notes appear at the bottom of the page for easy reference. Moreover, and importantly for a book that argues the significance of material culture, the text is accompanied by illustrations: reproductions of
newsbooks, title pages, and portraits of Anna Trapnel and Elizabeth Alkin. There is also a detailed index, helpful for both students and active scholars. The only curiosity in this otherwise extremely well researched book is the omission of some scholarship on collaboration in the mid-seventeenth-century book trade, notably the work of Stephen Dobranski. This minor caveat aside, Nevitt's study makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the revolutionary public sphere and those who shaped it.


The actual scope of Rebecca Totaro's study is significantly less ambitious than the title implies; her more modest major premise is intriguing, however, as she reads early modern English utopian literature exclusively as a cultural response to bubonic plague. The period from 1348 to approximately 1720 Totaro calls "plague time" (4). Totaro finds in "plague-literature" literary "works produced either in direct response to a plague visitation or those in which bubonic plague functions as an essential event or primary metaphor" (13), including utopian fiction. Such plague literature, she contends, demonstrates that, in a state of perpetual anxiety over the possibility or reality of epidemic, "they [men and women] practiced utopianism, imagining that in the future their children would live longer and in less fear. Those with the most powerful imaginations began the work of building toward that place of improved health" (36). In these plague-inspired utopias, their authors fashion boundless literary domains "in which to illustrate and then animate abstract ideas, seeing whether and to what degree they work, before perhaps employing them in the real world" (19). And from this genre's characteristic interrogation of the universal, familiar experience of bubonic plague, early modern culture realizes "there is practical hope, a realistic guide to a more prosperous future that begins now" (19).

Totaro's claims interestingly suggest she will employ a form of cultural poetics to read her chosen plague texts as dynamic agents of cultural production. But her various explications of plague-time utopias end in contradictions and closed readings. The reader is warned: "some of these plague-