

## 'MISORCUS' AND RICHARD RICHARDSON

In this article I would like to explore a pair of doctrinal dispute texts published in 1676 and 1677. They concern an anonymous writer, 'Misorcus', who was vehemently opposed to the Quaker theological position at that time and Richard Richardson, a London Quaker and the movement's second recording clerk, succeeding Ellis Hooke in 1681. Richardson, according to the entry by Skidmore in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, was a schoolmaster firstly in Essex and then London.<sup>1</sup> He became clerk to several other meetings and committees and also took to publishing several controversial books and pamphlets, as indeed did many other Quakers at this time. He was very much at the centre of Friends' administrative activities in London and was at the heart of the embryo library of published material which later became the national repository now housed in Friends' House, London.

My interest in the two texts was sparked by an investigation I carried out into the different writing styles comparing some seventeenth-century establishment writers and early Friends. I am interested in the manner in which Quakers and their opponents conducted doctrinal disputes in the latter part of the seventeenth century. What were their approaches? How might their language use differ? These two pamphlets serve well as examples of the genre.

First, let's consider the 'anti-Quaker' writer. The name itself is a mystery and any underlying meaning must be speculative. It is not recognised by the *OED* as a meaningful word. Misorcus styles himself an 'anti-Quaker' in his response<sup>2</sup> to an earlier Quaker publication *A Treatise of Oaths*<sup>3</sup>, that he describes as a 'tedious pamphlet'. This publication is signed by twelve Friends, including William Penn, George Whitehead and Stephen Crisp. We do not actually know who this person was but he strongly objected to the Quaker position on swearing oaths of allegiance. He insists the Quakers hold

- (1) [...] vain, false and anti-scriptural opinions, which they cannot maintain either by God's holy Word, or any rational Arguments, as I shall [...] prove.'

The text is a treatise addressed to 'Lords and Commons' (i.e.

Parliament) following the Quakers' request to be free from the obligation of swearing oaths of allegiance and to be permitted to worship after the manner of Friends. He attempts to show up their 'anti-scriptural opinions' which he finds 'absurd, false and frivolous', finding the scriptural and other references provided by Quakers to be 'of no validity'. He uses classic disputing techniques of logical reasoning supported by many quotations in Latin. Half-way through he admits he ought to finish there but instead brings in references to St. Jerome (AD 422) as support for the proper existence of the oath of allegiance.

Richardson, responding a few months later on behalf of the 1675 Quaker group who signed the original *Treatise of Oaths* as well on behalf of Friends generally, uses the technique that Friends had perfected of not addressing directly the accusations made but instead objecting to the personalisation of the dispute by Misorcus, in an assurance that they themselves have no intention of making personal comments about the writer. Richardson expresses dismay that Misorcus has done that to them as well as hiding behind anonymity. Other Quaker objections include Misorcus's partial selection of quotations from the Quakers' earlier writings and the patronising use of the terms 'illiterate' or '(un)learned'. These phrases are repeated five times by Richardson in which he demonstrates his own knowledge of Latin by pointing out several language errors made by Misorcus himself.

Misorcus's text is almost 16,000 words long and he uses a good deal of this word count to build his argument in favour of swearing oaths of allegiance. Richardson is in the end goaded into responding, though much less longwindedly (under 2500 words). This is not the place to set out the structure of either man's argument in full. However, one point addressed by Richardson is to dispute the use of the quotations from the Douay-Rheims Catholic Bible (which would not have been in favour in the 1670s) and from various bishops, insisting that these authors are not themselves in favour of swearing (cf. Matthew's gospel). Richardson uses a familiar approach in which Friends often try to deal with conflict by emphasising that there is no fundamental disagreement between them. He simply explains that both Quakers and non-Quakers surely believe in the value of truth-telling; it is merely that the Quakers object to the outward

ceremony of swearing.

I now move from the larger picture to a brief comparison of language use by the two protagonists. Misorcus uses a traditional, formal register, probably more for show than for trying to put his argument across. (He may be more concerned with gaining advantage by writing an unsolicited treatise to Parliament than with converting Quakers to his point of view.) For instance, he begins by addressing the Lords and Commons, examples (2) and (3) below:

- (2) With respect to the former part of it [the Treatise] I have (as many of my Brethren in the Ministry have learnedly done before me) implored my weak endeavours for the satisfaction of their scrupulous Consciences, referring the execution of the latter part of it, for severe [Note: *Corrigi eos cupimus non necari, nee Disciplinam circa eos negligi.* Aug. Ep. 127.] Discipline, to your Honours great Authority, and most Sage Counsels; for a blessing on which, to the advancement of Gods glory, the good of the Church, the safety, honour and welfare of our Sovereign and his Kingdoms, with the publick you have the daily private Prayers and Supplications of him who conceales his Name, not out of a guilty Fear, but a cautious Prudence, not willing to have it aspers'd with reproaches and unjust calumnies, with bitter railings and Invectives [...]

And towards the end of his text he says:

- (3) To that exquisite gloss of Mercerus, I cannot omit to subjoyn another of the great Scripturist Deodatus (once Professor of Geneva) upon the forecited Text of Ecclesiastes, which in my opinion comes home to an obstinate Quaker, or any other Dissenter, his numerical words are these[...]

Richardson's style, while characterized by less florid language does lead to ambiguity in places, particularly in terms of syntax and cohesion, see his use of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun in example (4) below. We have to deduce who is 'he' and who is 'they'. His intention is probably to create a stance-related gap, lending authorial distance in referencing Misorcus as 'he' and the Quakers as 'they', and at the same time aligning himself as a neutral writer with his readers.

- (4) A Strange Forreign Name, come from Rome or Constantinople, as the illiterate Quaker may think (*he* for whom *he* pretends to have taken such Pains) who being better acquainted with Scripture-Language, and seeing *his* whole Endeavours through *his* Book employed in Opposing the Command of Christ, and adjuring men to break it by Swearing, thinks it might have been far more truly, properly & pertinently Antichrist's exorcist, as one likely to have such an Office in that Synagogue, as the highest Preferment *he* has been capable to attain. And the rather because after the innate Principle thereof *he* takes upon him immediately after the mention of *his* weak Endeavours in Doctrine, to adjure the Magistrate to severe Discipline, only short of killing the Quakers; *they* that delivered the Martyrs to be burned, used as mild Expressions.

Misorcus's style of address shifts between 3<sup>rd</sup> person '*he*' and 2<sup>nd</sup> person '*thou*' in speaking directly to Richardson. Each is disagreeing with the other: Misorcus uses learned references and Latin quotations in his elegant, complex sentences as illustrated in example (5):

- (5) The Father's Gloss is this, which for the benefit of an illiterate Quaker, I shall translate word for word into English; [Note: *Hanc per elementa jurandi pessimam consuetudinem semper habuere Iudæi, &c.*]

Richardson, though not as unlearned as Misorcus would like to imagine, piles up his clauses together and eschews the obsequious phrases found in his opponent's text (see example (4)). Both writers are evenly matched but where Misorcus's text reads like an unremarkable, if pretty impolite, seventeenth-century educated figure, Richardson's style has many of the characteristics of the distinctive approach developed by Friends at that time.<sup>4</sup>

This method of exploiting a polemic as exemplified by my pair of texts is representative of a substantial collection of pamphlets and books published by Friends towards the latter part of the century in order to convince the general readership of their doctrinal position and to refute accusations by their opponents. Kate Peters<sup>5</sup> maintains that the disputes were in many cases

encouraged by the Quakers: new pamphlet titles were published and distributed in a locality and Quaker preaching at public meetings made use of these texts; this engendered disputes and arguments with the local establishment of magistrates and ministers. Quakers would then publish an account of such a confrontation and follow that up with any trial proceedings or other developments. Peters says the writing: 'could move from the general to the specific in what appears to be a calculated process'.

This short article is designed to provide a snapshot of the possibilities available to any readers or researchers interested in tracking related sets of pamphlets and tracts in connection with early Quaker writers and their published adversaries. The field is open for a variety of related disciplines as well as for general readers wanting to know some of the less well-known byways in this period of Quakerism. The 'adverse' collection of texts held in the Library of the Religious Society of Friends in London is a rich source of information, in particular where one is able to match up anti-Quaker dispute texts into their historical sequence with those published by Friends. The holdings deserve to be better known. It would be good to know who Misorcus was, too!

*Judith Roads*

## END NOTES

1. Gil Skidmore, 'Richard Richardson' (2015), in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/69118>
2. Misorcus. *The anti-Quaker, or, A compendious answer to a tedious pamphlet entituled, A treatise of oaths subscribed by a jury of 12 Quakers, whose names are prefixed to it.* 1676 (Wing. A3506).
3. Richard Richardson. *A treatise of oaths containing several weighty reasons why the people call'd Quakers refuse to swear : and those confirmed by numerous testimonies out of Gentiles, Jews and Christians, both fathers, doctors and martyrs : presented to the King and great council of England, assembled in Parliament.* 1675. (Wing.R1399)
4. Judith Roads, 'Early Quaker broadsides corpus: a case study'. In *Quaker Studies*, 17(1), (2012), 27-47.
5. Kate Peters, 1995. 'Patterns of Quaker Authorship'. In Corns, T. and Loewenstein, D (eds.) *The Emergence of Quaker writing: Dissenting Literature in Seventeenth-century England.* London: Frank Cass, 1995. p. 6-24.