

Mary (Tickell) Overton (1615 – after 1655)

you are so busied with the great affaires of the kingdome (as you call it) that you can find no time these sixe years to proclaime liberty to the captive, freedome to the oppressed, to right the cause of the poore, to heare the cry of the fatherlesse and widdow...

—The humble appeal and petition of Mary Overton, p. 9

MARY AND RICHARD OVERTON, civil rights activists, published dozens of tracts promoting popular sovereignty; religious tolerance even for Jews and Catholics; separation of church and state; public education; freedom of speech; the abolition of imprisonment for debt; the right of commoners to petition Parliament; and a constitutional bill of rights. As a result, they spent much of their married life in trouble with the law.

Mary, eldest child of John and Maria (*née* Harpam) Tickell, was christened 3 September 1615, in Withern, Lincolnshire. On 23 April 1635, in Withern, she married Richard Overton, also of Lincolnshire.¹ The couple settled in London, where they became involved with religious nonconformists and political free-thinkers. By 1640, the Overtons had begun operating an unlicensed printshop. Richard was at first the sole author on the Overton booklist, writing without attribution. In November 1640 the Overtons published Richard's *Vox borealis, or the Northern Discoverie*, a satire on the First Bishops' War: a dialogue between "Jamie" and "Willie" figures Charles I as a trucebreaker, the Anglican prelates as war-mongering scoundrels, and the English army as a troop of buffoons who were chased from Berwick by Scottish housewives. Soon after came *Questions to be Disputed in Counsell of the Lords Spirituall*, which again lampooned the Anglican bishops. Both tracts bore the imprint of "Margerie Mar-Prelate" (from her press in "Thwackcoat-lane, at the Signe of the Crab-tree Cudgell"); but they were in fact printed by Richard and Mary Overton at their secret press in Bell Alley, near Finsbury Field (an establishment referenced in modern scholarship, until recently, as the "Cloppenburg" press, a misnomer).² Overton's first signed pamphlets were his *Articles of High Treason Exhibited Against Cheap-Side Crosse* (January 1642/3) and *New* [i.e., revised] *Lambeth Fayre* (March 1642/3); after which, he and Mary were never free, for long, from government surveillance and persecution, first from the Royalists, then from Cromwell's government.

In 1641, the Company of Stationers, under direction of the House of Lords, seized the Overtons' printing press, moveable type, paper, and printed books. For the next two years, Richard Overton's pamphlets – chiefly anti-Catholic and anti-Laudian satires – were printed by others. But by 1643 the Overtons were back in business with their own underground press, having now a broader, more secular and developing agenda. They formed a loose confederation with John and Elizabeth Lilburne, and William Walwyn; and with the booksellers, Peter Cole and William Larner. Their common agenda: oppose the tyrant, King Charles, and the doctrine of prerogative rule; promote parliamentary governance; and proclaim the "natural" rights of the individual.

From the work of these few visionaries grew the Levellers movement, a coalition of soldiers and civilians whose organized efforts during the Civil War arose from their passionate commitment to individual liberty; for whose cause Richard Overton was the principal theoretician. From 1644-1649 the Levellers inundated London with political tracts; and the House of Commons, with petitions. The House of Lords, offended by this activity, waged a relentless but futile campaign to find the authors and printers of Leveller literature, to incarcerate them, and to confiscate and burn their unlicensed books. The Levellers received scant support from the House of Commons, and endured much persecution from Cromwell, whom the Levellers came to perceive as a new tyrant to replace the old one. Undaunted by repression, Richard Overton wrote, "this persecuted means of unlicensed printing hath done more good to the people than all

¹ Born about 1614, Richard Overton matriculated as a sizar from Queens' College, Cambridge, at Easter 1631; he may also be identified with the Richard Overton(s) named as executor to (brother) Henry Overton, stationer of London (18 November 1646); and another (uncle) Henry Overton of London (1 Jan. 1650/1).

² For the history of this misnamed operation and Richard Overton's role, see David R. Como, "Secret Printing and the Crisis of 1640," *Past and Present* 196 (2007): 37-82.

the bloody wars; the one tending to rid us quite of all slavery; but the other, only to rid us of one, and involves us into another.”³

As surveillance and repression escalated, the independent book trade thrived as never before. During the English Civil War, hundreds of unlicensed publications appeared that were critical of church and state. More than one hundred of those titles were from the pen of Richard Overton; and those, chiefly, printed at the Overtons’ clandestine printshop.

In July 1646, Overton published *An Alarum to the House of Lords*. MPs in the House of Lords, taking note of that alarum, smelled the rat for whom they had been searching. Their investigation ended on August 11th, with a dawn raid on the home of Richard and Mary Overton. A detachment of musketeers stormed their Southwark home, pulled Richard from bed, ransacked the house, and took many personal belongings, including books and papers. Richard was hauled before the self-serving prerogative bar of the House of Lords. Refusing to answer questions before a tribunal that he considered wholly illegal, Overton was sent to Newgate prison, on a charge of contempt.

Richard did some of his best writing and thinking while in prison. Mary soldiered on at the printing press. Despite Richard’s confinement, the Overtons contrived to publish *A Defiance against All Arbitrary Usurpations* (a narrative of Richard’s arrest, printed in September); and *An Arrow against All Tyrants and Tyranny, Shot from the Prison of Newgate into the Prerogative Bowels of the Arbitrary House of Lords* (October).

On 5 January 1646/7, the House of Lords directed the Company of Stationers, by prerogative order, to search out all copies of a seditious pamphlet called *Regall Tyrannie Discovered*, a book “full of treason and scandall,” published anonymously. All copies were to be burned; the author and printer, to be identified and arrested. The next day, officers of the Stationers Company raided Mary Overton’s house. When the thugs broke down the door, they found Thomas “Johnson” (as he first called himself – actually, Thomas Overton, brother of Robert) stitching printed copies of *Regall Tyrannie Discovered*. Mary Overton was found to be in possession of these and many other offending tracts by the same anonymous author (her incarcerated husband).

Thomas Overton, and Mary (with her nursing infant), were taken to the new prison in Maiden Lane, where they remained until brought before the Lords’ prerogative bar. From the Journal of the House of Lords for 6 January 1646/7:

Overton’s wife examined, about the pamphlet called *Regal Tyranny*: This day Mary Overton, the wife of Overton, was brought to the Bar; who being demanded by the Speaker, Who brought the scandalous pamphlet called *Regall Tyranny Discovered, &c.*, to her shop, and of whom she had them? And she said, She would not answer to Interrogatories; and she would not tell him. ...

Ordered: That the said Mary Overton shall stand committed to the prison of Bridewell, for her contempt to this House; there to remain during the pleasure of this House.

The Bridewell (once, a palace of Henry VIII, then a poorhouse) was by now become one of London’s most notorious prisons for female offenders. Mary refused to comply with the warrant commanding her transfer from Maiden Lane: Her husband writes: “Like a true-bred Englishwoman brought up at the feet of Gamaliel, she told the marshal that she would not obey it, neither would she stir after it so much as to set one leg before another, in attendance thereto.”

Mary’s refusal to be escorted on foot to the Bridewell was ill received. Richard Overton reports: “No sooner had this turkey-cock marshal heard of her uprightness to the Commons of England, but up he bristled his feathers, and looked as big and as bug as a Lord ... out he belched his fury and told her that if she would not go, then she should be ‘carried in a porter’s basket, or else dragged at a cart’s arse.’”

The Marshall sent for two porters to transport Mary Overton. When they came and found no criminal but only a “poor, little, harmless, innocent woman,” with a “tender babe on her breast,” they refused to take her. A city cartman was summoned. He, too, on “hearing what this woman was, wisely refused to lay hands on her, and departed in peace.”

Taking the labor upon himself, the City Marshall “struts towards her like a crow in a gutter, and with his valiant looks (like a man of mettle) assails her and her babe, and by violence attempt[ed] to pluck her babe out of her arms; but she forcibly defended it and kept it in, despite of his manhood.” The marshal and his cohort then “laid violent hands upon her, and dragged her down the stairs, and in that infamous, barbarous

³ Overton, *A Defiance against All Arbitrary Usurpations* (London, 1646), 8-9.

manner drew her headlong upon the stones in all the dirt and mire of the streets.” Suspended under the arms by two cudgels, and clinging still to her crying infant, Mary Overton was dragged the three miles across London to the Bridewell, being reviled along the way with the epithets *whore* and *strumpet*.

(Overton warns his readers, “this is the honor that their lordships are pleased to confer on the free commoners’ wives who stand for their freedoms and liberties.”)⁴

At Bridewell, the infant was taken from Mary and delivered to Richard’s impecunious sister and her husband; who stayed that night in Richard and Mary’s house, with the three children. In the morning, deputies from the House of Lords were sent to arrest the sister and brother-in-law. By a stroke of luck, and with the aid of neighbors, the in-laws and the children escaped; but the residence was shut up, leaving the parents in prison without income, and their children homeless.

In February Richard Overton and John Lilburne collaborated on *The Out-Cryes of the Oppressed Commons*, arguing that arbitrary government had dissolved the social contract; the people were therefore entitled to draft a new Constitution.

Richard’s brother, meanwhile, languished in the Maiden Lane jail; and Mary remained in the Bridewell, her three days for contempt stretching to three months.

Concerned for his family, Overton on the first of February addressed his *Commoners Complaint* to Henry Martin, MP in the House of Commons, without results. In March was drafted *The Humble Appeale and Petition of Mary Overton*, a collaborative effort. This was the first of two petitions directly begging Parliament either to charge Mary Overton with a crime and bring her to trial; or to release her from custody. The “Petition of Mary Overton” was smuggled out of prison; printed by one of the secret Leveller presses; and submitted to the House of Commons in March 1647 (The second, shorter, petition was handwritten by Mary, in April, after the death of her infant):

[From *Women’s Works*, vol. 4. Mary Overton’s texts follow on pp. 321-332]

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⁴ Richard Overton, *Commoners Complaint* (London, 1647): 17–20.