

The Cry of a Virgin: Politics, Gender and Self-representation in 17th-century Prophetic Genres

Carme Font Paz

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

Carme.Font@uab.es

It has been suggested that women prophets in the culture of seventeenth-century England represent the first significant group of women to establish the political authority of self-conscious female identity, and that as such they represent a foundational moment in the development of modern feminist consciousness.¹

My paper will argue that the political, religious and social upheavals in the English Revolution witnessed an explosion of prophetic speech among women. As a result, women prophets forged a widely-read literary genre which suited both their private and public concerns; at the same time, this venue allowed them to approach a sense of feminine writing away from the *topos* found in the *Querelles des femmes*, thus contributing to the formation of a prehistory of novelistic discourse (understood in Bakhtinean terms).

According to Phyllis Mack², some three hundred women prophesied during the 1640s and 1650s. Not all of these women's visions appeared as published tracts, but documentary evidence indicates that in the years 1641 to 1660, some 50 women prophets produced roughly 156 published treatises. Given that only 39 female-authored first editions of any genre appeared in the first forty years of the seventeenth century, the women prophets' publishing record represents a significant contribution in women's literary history.

In the manner of the Hebrew prophets of old, many female visionaries understood themselves to be called by God to warn political leaders. For women such as these, calls to prophesy and to intervention in the public sphere could take the form of dramatic visions, complex dreams, and audible voices. Likewise, prophetic messages themselves ranged from dramatic pronouncements of doom to carefully plotted exegetical commentary.

My paper will study these issues focusing on three prophetic discourses: Eleanor Davies *To the Citie of London* (1645); Anna Trapnel *The Cry of a Stone* (1654); and Katherine Evans and Sarah Cheevers *A Short Relation of their Sufferings* (1662).

Carme Font Paz is Associate Professor in the English Literature Department at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain. She has published the chapter "The Renaissance" for the volume *The Cultural History of Reading*, Greenwood Press, 2008. She is also a full member of the Women's Writers Project at Brown University. She is reading her Doctoral thesis on the genre of Prophecy and Women Prophets in 17th-century England.

¹ Feroli, Teresa. *Political Speaking Justified*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006.

² Mack, Phyllis. *Visionary Women, Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England*, England: University of California Press, 1992.