

**‘THE CURE OF THE
KINGDOME’:
DEFENDING FEMALE
AUTHORSHIP IN
ELIZABETH POOLE’S *A
VISION* (1648)**

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Abstract

A Vision: Wherein is Manifested the Disease and Cure of the Kingdome (1648) is Elizabeth Poole’s account of the prophecies she delivered before Cromwell and the Puritan Army’s General Council as they debated the regicide of Charles I at the end of the first English Civil War in 1648-49. In her “message”, Poole invokes the analogy between king and husband to advise the Army officers not to execute the “head” of their “body”; however, she gives this analogy a radical twist when she adds that the Council should divorce the king instead, since he had violated the terms of his “marriage” by behaving abusively and tyrannically. While the circumstances surrounding Poole’s participation in the Whitehall deliberations are unclear, her appearance represents a rare case of a woman’s direct involvement in the mid-seventeenth-century discussions of the scope and legitimacy of government. This article discusses the reception of Elizabeth Poole’s text by her contemporaries, as seen in her own

Resumen

A Vision: Wherein is Manifested the Disease and Cure of the Kingdome (1648) es el relato de Elizabeth Poole de las profecías que comunicó ante Cromwell y el Consejo General del Ejército puritano mientras se debatía el regicidio de Carlos I de Inglaterra al término de la primera Guerra Civil en 1648-49. En su “mensaje”, Poole invoca la analogía entre rey y esposo para aconsejar a los miembros del ejército que no ejecuten la “cabeza” de su “cuerpo”; no obstante, Poole da un giro radical a esta analogía cuando añade que Cromwell debería divorciarse del rey ya que éste ha violado los términos de su “matrimonio” al comportarse de forma tiránica y abusiva. Aunque las circunstancias que rodearon la participación de Poole en las deliberaciones de Whitehall son poco claras, su comparecencia supone un caso único de implicación directa de una mujer en los debates sobre el alcance y la legitimidad del gobierno a mediados del siglo XVII. Este artículo aborda la recepción del texto de Elizabeth Poole por parte de sus contemporáneos, tal como se aprecia en la defensa que la autora hace de su derecho a

defence of her right to relaying her divinely inspired opinion in print.

comunicar y publicar una opinión de inspiración divina.

Keywords: Early Modern women's writing, authorship, prophetic writing, seventeenth-century.

Palabras clave: escritoras del Renacimiento, autoría, escritura profética, siglo XVII.

In England, the decades from 1640 to 1660 saw a revitalisation of polemics in print, fostered above all by the English Civil War and its aftermath, as well as the hopes vested in the Revolution until the Restoration. According to data provided by Catharine Gray, there were “over 34,900 broadsides, books and pamphlets published between 1640 and 1660, with 3,666 books published in 1642 alone compared to just 625 in 1639” (2007:22). This is the environment within which an active group of women writers known as “prophetesses” published their tracts and pamphlets; they themselves were eager participants in the publishing process, and the control they exerted over it was germane to their own fashioning of a public figure. The mechanisms of mediation and agency played an important role in the actual transmission of the prophetic message, and ranged from the possible presence of male supervisors, promoters or endorsers, down to the physical presence of the printed matter in the market, its presentation, lettering and format.

Historians Patricia Crawford and Sara Mendelson remind us that “we cannot explain female diversity by positing that women automatically aligned themselves with the views of husbands, fathers, or other male family members. On the contrary, there are numerous instances of women who felt constrained to choose between a divided allegiance, when family loyalties pointed in one direction and their own inner convictions in another” (1998:417). What matters is not so much whether women with solid religious and political convictions eventually sacrificed either their ideas or their families. Remarkably large numbers of women had gained another view of themselves irrespective of, or alongside with, their traditional social roles: they could be both missionaries of God and wives, and enjoy a richer family life for that; they could negotiate both spaces –the public and the domestic– if one of them offered resistance to the other; or they could choose one over the other –sometimes risking their physical integrity and their respectability as married women. But, even in these cases, they were entitled to choose based on a fresh notion of their individual identity, a relational “core self” that was in interaction with the divine but also with the human.

The fact that women writers active in the 1640s–1660s actually wrote much more than their peers in previous generations is perhaps less meaningful than their becoming aware of why they did it, of what they wrote for and about, and their willingness to enter public debate and address communal issues with the zeal to

transform the social structures they inhabited. For all of these reasons prophecy was relevant in the creation of new roles for women: its very essence as a literary form involves a confrontation with the environment, and an attempt to fashion a form of personal authority that must be defended against external forces.

Prophecy is, in itself and by definition, an attempt to intervene in reality, a form of expression that is based on intimate belief but which is immediately projected onto an arena of hostility and debate. It requires from the speaker a capacity to build a strong persona that is ready for confrontation and willing to accept it. At the same time, the expansion of prophecy through sectarian printing networks is related to the speed at which both printers and booksellers had expanded and invigorated their businesses in the early seventeenth century. In his study of inventories by several booksellers between 1500 and 1700, Adam Fox has estimated that the market for printed works had diversified notably since the sixteenth century. During a ten-month period in 1520, the items on sale by the Oxford bookseller John Dorne were almost exclusively limited to theological tracts or classical texts (and he actually sold some 1,850 items); in stark contrast, in 1644 John Awdley of Hull had a list of nearly one thousand volumes offered for sale, which included a wide variety of pamphlets, political tracts, surreptitious copies of plays and 'small books' to cater for a wide popular readership. As Fox puts it, "the proliferation of printed works during the political breakdown of the mid-seventeenth century is revealed by the surviving collection of the London stationer, George Thomason¹, which amounted to a huge assortment of 14,942 pamphlets and 7,216 newspapers by the early 1660s" (Fox 2002:16). It was in such a fertile ground for publishing that the presence of women writers began to make itself felt. Elaine Hobby estimates that between 300 and 400 women wrote in the period from 1640 and 1700 (1988:26-27), and that over one-half of these writers set down tracts of a religious and political nature. Mary Prior published a checklist of 651 works divided among 293 women authors (1985:242). More recently, Phyllis Mack has documented the existence of some 300 active female writers in the 1640 and 1650s devoted exclusively to religious writing (1994:165). Many of these materials were never reproduced in print at all or eventually published as independent tracts, but there is clear evidence that in the period between 1640 and 1660 at least 50 of these women managed to publish over 150 treatises, an overwhelming majority of which were devoted to religious matters. It is no coincidence that this growing presence of women in the public sphere via the medium of print should take place during the whole historical process of the English Revolution. In his extensive survey of the material culture of print, Nigel Smith acknowledges that although the distribution of printed texts in the seventeenth

¹ George Thomason (d. 1666) was an English book collector famous for assembling more than 22,000 books and pamphlets published during the time of the Civil War and the Interregnum.

century is still an understudied matter, it is undoubtedly true that Revolutionary England underwent an “information revolution” due in part to the collapse of royal censorship laws in the early 1640s. For Smith, the printed word is highly visible in these two decades, and the transfer of printing powers from royal monopoly to a myriad of larger and smaller printing businesses impinges on the relationship between a writer and his or her text:

Putting something into print is closely associated with becoming an author. If religious publication prior to 1640s was largely in the hands of the clergy, so that even the most popular holy broadsheets were an attempt to make the alehouses in which they were posted holy, the 1640s and 1650s saw the emergence of lay religious authorship on an unprecedented scale. Those who wrote political treatises, and those who published ‘pure literature’, also multiplied. Ultimately, many new kinds of authorship would appear, and the ‘scene of writing’ itself was generally and startlingly changed. (Smith 1994:23)

Religious writing produced by female authors stands out in this period exactly in the terms proposed by Smith, both in terms of their sheer quantity and in the material conditions of their circulation. Although there is no proof that women prophets and pamphleteers received money from their writings, we have ample evidence (Zaret 1992) suggesting that these grassroots writers, many of them only barely literate, wrote and published more extensively than their highly intellectual counterparts by virtue of their impact in the public arena. They were paid “in kind”, in the sense that printers bore the costs of printing and distribution, whereas prophetesses only relayed their messages, and in some cases, supervised the printing process. It is also in this sense that women prophetesses are to be regarded as modern authors.

The controversies over the forms and attributions of the state were at the thematic core of the work by the women prophets, but their credibility and influence depended on two key, interrelated factors: on the one hand, their capacity to harness and distribute the infrastructure of publication and diffusion; on the other, their chances of establishing an authority strong enough to legitimise their willingness to make themselves heard.

THE CASE OF ELIZABETH POOLE

The work and public exposure of prophetess Elizabeth Poole (c.1622-1668) was circumscribed by a momentous, transcendent occasion in the history of England: the

weeks between December 1648 and January 1649 in which the Army Council debated the possible execution of Charles I.

Like most of her contemporary prophetesses, there is scant biographical data about the origins and personal circumstances of Elizabeth Poole. Some facts about her background may be gleaned from her own texts, *The Clarke Papers* (1647-49), and a handful of letters attached to a reprint of her writings, bound together as *A Prophesie Touching the Death of King Charles* (1649) and slightly amended by bookseller George Thomason. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* devotes an entry to Elizabeth Poole, written by Manfred Brod, in which we read that she was probably baptised in 1622 and died in or after 1668. The only piece of evidence we have of her after 1649 is her preaching in 1653 at the chapel of Somerset House in London in favour of Leveller John Lilburne, who was on trial for his life. In 1668 she was imprisoned in the Gatehouse for maintaining an unlicensed press at her house in Southwark. Nothing else is known of her further career or her actual death.

In a letter written in 1649, Thomasine Pendarves (wife of the Baptist preacher John Pendarves) vindicates Poole, who, since her second appearance before the Army Council had been excommunicated from her Baptist congregation. Pendarves also mentions that she was living “by her hands” (1649₂:9). This is an indication that Poole was probably a seamstress from the separatist hotbed of Abington, and that she might have joined a London-based Particular Baptist congregation sometime around 1644 and 1645, defying the authority of her father. As Marcus Nevitt remarks (2002:234), no record survives for Elizabeth Poole in the Baptist archive of the Angus Library at Regent’s Park College, Oxford, and a few periodical accounts suggest that Poole was actively preaching in the 1650s, although this information is not reliable. *The Weekly Intelligencer* mentions a “one Mrs Anne Pool, who Preached on the last *Sunday* and on the *Sunday* before in the Chappel at *Somerset-House*, she took her Text out of that in *Essay. Thou shall write with the pen of a man*. Care is taken for the future, to prevent all disturbances in that nature” (1653:930). “Anne” may or may not be “Elizabeth” Poole, but it is obvious that *The Weekly Intelligencer* did not sympathise with her preaching activities. At the same time, Maureen Bell (1997:190) notes that Elizabeth Poole was living at Mink in Southwark in 1668 and was arrested that very same year for owning the place where an unlicensed printing press, called the Blue Anchor Alley Press, ran its business. The printing press actually belonged to Elizabeth Calvert, and the Stationers’ Company ordered that it be raided.

The reliable biographic data concerning Poole identify her as the daughter of Robert Poole who, in 1645, attacked his congregation’s minister, William Kiffin (1616-1701), for “seducing” his children away from his home and into the controversial Baptist church. Kiffin was born as a poor orphan and became a wealthy wool merchant and a Nonconformist. Bernard Capp remarks that wealthy

millenarians, as Kiffin probably was at the beginning of his ministry, avoided Fifth Monarchism due to the movement's emphasis on an equal distribution of wealth (1972:93). They tended to gravitate towards Baptist groups or used their businesses and political leverage to engage in parliamentary affairs.

Kiffin came to sign the First London (1644) and the Second London Confession of Faith (1677) and embraced the belief that baptism should be delivered only to believers (Ivimey1833:33). The Particular Baptists were a Calvinist branch of the larger Baptist sect whose roots reached all the way back to John of Leiden and the Anabaptist groups of Münster in the 1530s. According to Joseph Ivimey (*ibid.*:32), John Milton joined the Particular Baptists in around 1646: "The most eminent man, the most learned scholar, and most powerful writer in the kingdom, John Milton, was, at the time referred to in the above extract, a member of the denomination." They were considered to be a threat to the social order—both in England and in the continent—because of their insistence on severing traditional family ties between parents and children, since the former were expected to relinquish their power over their children's freedom of religious choice. They also empowered older children and servants to opt for baptism by themselves, rejected mandatory tithes and an ordained clergy, and were committed to forms of egalitarian self-organization.

In 1645 there appeared a printed dialogue between Robert Poole and William Kiffin entitled *A Briefe Remonstrance of The Reasons and Grounds of those People commonly Called Anabaptists* (1645)² which constitutes an eloquent example of why groups such as the Baptists were acceptable alternatives to traditional domesticity. William Kiffin preached that "infinite Love which hath redeemed a people to God, out of all Nations, tongues, and kindred, hath also made them Kings and priests unto God, to reigne with him in his spirituall Kingdome here on the earth" (11). This emphasis upon spiritual equality was a defining characteristic of independent congregations and entailed extending the right of prophesy to women. The *Confession of Faith* of 1644 insisted that all who had "the gift" of prophesy were permitted to do so, and Elizabeth Poole would have felt the statement applied to her.

Although the reasons why Elizabeth Poole appeared before a plenary session of the General Council on December 29, 1648, are almost impossible to ascertain, Phyllis Mack states that "Poole's appearance before the Council was so opportune

² James Leo Garret in *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study* describes the particulars of the dialectical confrontation between Robert Poole and William Kiffin on matters of infant Baptism and the reasons why, according to Poole, the Particular Baptists had "defected" from Independent Churches.

that a Royalist report accused Cromwell of lodging her in seclusion at Whitehall and rehearsing her for her appearance" (1994:79). Kiffin's close relationship with Oliver Cromwell prompted the latter to invite prophetesses in order to persuade members of the Army Council of the political goals he held at that time: removing Charles I and maintaining political power within the hands of the Generals rather than forming a republic, as was desired by the Levellers and radical elements within the army. While Poole's first public intervention in Whitehall was warmly accepted and she was even offered temporary lodgings there, as was customary for sympathisers of the army, her second appearance was much more contested by council members since she clearly advocated for preserving the life of King Charles I. The issue of whether Poole was acting on behalf of someone else, and especially of whom, has been a subject of speculation.³ It is uncertain whether Poole's antiregicidal discourse was secretly sponsored by a parliamentary source (most probably John Lilburne or even by Kiffin himself) or whether this was really her own twist challenging army officers. Poole was undoubtedly a sympathiser with the Army's Council, and she was invited to foster its agenda which, at that time, leaned heavily towards dispensing with the king's life.

There are reasons for assuming that Poole was encouraged, and perhaps even manipulated, by some members of the Baptist community; but the kind of public personality that she tried to create in her appearances before the Army Council and in her tracts did not depend on that backing, but rather on the form of her address and the sense of relevance that she attributed to her own intervention in the political debate at hand. As Susan Wiseman states:

Poole's story and its personnel tell us not that Poole was a puppet at the General Council, but that there are reasons to understand her pamphlets as making a considered intervention in a particular debate, being likely to find readers and pointing us towards a set of women and men who were considering the import of visions for the commonwealth. (2006:168)

Poole was perhaps representing a common interest in her appearances before the Council and in her writings, but she was doing so with a clear sense of her role in these activities and the dramatic importance of the issues being addressed in public, and immediately afterwards, in print.

³ Teresa Feroli (2006:68) suggests that Poole may have been brought before the Council by either Colonel Rich or General Fairfax, since both men were interested in preserving the king's life. Ian Gentles (2004:301) makes the same point. Manfred Brod (1999:398) supports this view drawing from the facts that Colonel Rich interrogated Poole after her second vision and that Thomasine Pendarves mentions a "Colonel Reeth", a name which is homophonic with "Rich". For their part, David Underdown (1985:183) and Marcus Nevitt (2002:235ff.) point to either Cromwell or Ireton as the sponsor of Poole's appearance, although evidence of this is not conclusive.

For Elizabeth Poole the prophetic experience took place at a specific location in a historically determined occasion, being directly related to that event and specifically centred on it without branching out into any other areas of doctrine, spirituality or social life. Poole's prophecy is localised in terms of subject matter and historical context. Her experience of prophecy entails specific repercussions linked to the political space where it occurs as a form of intervention in it. This leads her to the elaboration of a serious political discourse, which draws on traditional images and ideas, but which nevertheless becomes a valid contribution to the main debate at stake: the possible execution of the king and its aftermath for the present and the future of England. As we shall see, Poole was not only furthering her ideas, but also the political agenda of the Baptist groups that had backed her in her appearance before the Army Council.

This sense of prophecy as a localised, historically contextualised event is related to another aspect that is specifically characteristic of Poole: the fact that her self-representation, the prophetic personality that she builds for herself, is also modified and determined by the political circumstances in which she intervenes. Her corpus is too small to speak of a consistent evolution or of a long, organic development: there are instead noticeable changes in her prophetic, public self in the two major publications that carry her signature (*A Vision* and *Another Alarum*), and these were motivated by the regicide itself, which Poole had attempted to prevent in the first of these tracts, and which she lamented in the latter. She initially appears to be modest and restrained (although firmly convinced) about her own status and capacity as a prophetess; later on, after the transcendent moment of the regicide, she assumes a more outspoken and vindictive persona with dramatic, apocalyptic overtones. In both tracts written by Poole, the specific visionary material on which her discourse is based is succinct and contained, summarised only in a few short lines: in strict quantitative terms, the purely visionary material is extremely short compared to her development and political elaboration of it. In the case of *Another Alarum*, moreover, the central image that she describes as having "seen" is not even openly described by her as a vision, as it was the case in the first tract. This can be partly explained as a result of the urgency of the issues at hand, and of the intricacy and relevance of the political subject that Poole was handling. But it is also possible to read this as a fundamental characteristic of Poole's attitude as a prophetess, of the way in which her visionary experience underlies her political perspective and her entrance into it. Even her contemporary audience understood that her "messages from the Lord" were concentrating too heavily on the political and social repercussions of regicide; as we shall see, this emphasis on politics over spirituality raised suspicious remarks from some of her readers and listeners, who came to question the prophetic or transcendent status of her message.

Poole's insistence on bringing the king to trial but preserving his person following the terms of her metaphor with the body politic infuriated most members of the Council (and probably Kiffin himself) after Poole's second appearance, to the point that her status as a prophet was questioned. The contrast with her first visit to Whitehall could not be starker. This controversy about authorial control prompted Poole's Baptist friend Thomasine Pendarves to vindicate her authority as a prophetess in a letter addressed to William Kiffin, in which she asked him "how you durst so peremptorily to judge the woman that has brought a vision from God" (Poole [Pendarves] 1649₁:13). In Pendarves's letter, she persuasively argues that "visions and revelations doe most especially confirme and strengthen those that have them" (1649₁:12) in a solid attempt to reinstate Poole's status as a prophetess. As a result of this exchange, Pendarves took care of printing and distributing new versions of *Another Alarum of War*.

Even if Poole was, to a certain extent, manipulated by members of her Baptist environment, it is clear that she was directly engaged in the creation of a public response to the execution of Charles I: before it occurred, she articulated the voice of those revolutionary sectors that were against it, and, after it had taken place, she was able to build a clear accusation against the army, playing on themes (the dangers of idolatry, especially) that had previously been popular in revolutionary discourse itself. What this entails is, in fact, no less than direct participation in the creation of forms of opinion that were not directly sponsored by the state; forms of opinion meant to influence the direction of state politics. Poole herself was aware of her engaging in this kind of opinion-making: all the references she makes to her own authority, and the continued vindication that she makes of all the "others" that may have been given the grace of God and deserve to be heard, involve a bid for the opening up of areas of political debate both life and in print.

The message that Poole delivered in Whitehall elicited a sustained negative response, although it had initially been received with a seal of approval by a few prominent members of the Army Council. Colonel Rich, for example, was delighted with the message of military supremacy that she seemed to be voicing: "I doe rejoyce to heare what hath been said, and itt meetes much with what hath been upon my heart heretofore [...] and shall rejoyce to see itt made out more and more in others" (TCP 2:151). Thomas Harrison similarly approved of the message, but asked her to define further the particular means wherewith the army should effect the "cure" that Poole suggested as the best solution for England. In her answer, Poole denied that there was any specific or detailed plan informing her vision, claiming instead that the army should put themselves on the hands of providence after renouncing any idea of regicide: "By the gift and faith of the Church shall you bee guided, which spirit is in you, which shall direct you" (TCP 2:154). Henry

Ireton's response to her first appearance before the Council was far more sceptical than those coming from Rich or Harrison, and therefore most telling:

I see nothing in her but those [things] that are the fruites of the spiritt of God, and am therefore apt to thinke soe at the present, being not able to judge the contrary, because mee thinkes it comes with such *a spiritt that does take and hold forth humility and self deniall*, and that rules very much about the whole that shee hath deliver'd, which makes mee have the better apprehension of itt for the present. It is only God that can judge the spiritts of men and women. (TCP 2:154)

The judgement that is voiced here seems positive overall, but in fact it presents itself as provisional: Ireton gives his approval "for the present" (an expression that he repeats twice), simply because he cannot "judge the contrary"; in the end, the final verdict is left only to God. Clearly, the slight sense of approval that is given here is justified on the grounds of the "humility and self-denial" that Poole showed in her appearance before the Council: this seems to point to a sense of a self-contained and modest attitude on the part of the prophetess.

But at this point, that status was being seriously disputed, and she herself had been forced to question it in her second appearance before the Army Council:

Col. Deane: I must desire to aske one question: whether you were commanded by the spiritt of God to deliver itt unto us in this manner.

Woman: I believe I had a command from God for itt.

Col. Deane: To deliver this paper in this forme?

Woman: To deliver in this paper or otherwise a message.

Col. Deane: And so you bringe itt, and present itt to us, as directed by his spiritt in you, and commanded to deliver itt to us?

Woman. Yea Sir, I doe. [...]

Mr Sadler: doe [you] offer this paper or [is it] from the Revelation of God?

Woman: I saw noe vision, nor noe Angell, nor heard no voice, butt my spiritt being drawne out about those thinges, *I was in itt*. Soe far as it is from God I thinke itt is a revelation. (TCP 2:164)

Colonel Deane's disbelief captures his difficulty in coming to terms with a woman expressing her own political views in public and in print; but his resistance seems also due to the fact that her prophetic dispatch is closer to a political statement than to a prophetic message. Deane insists on teasing Poole so as to make her clarify the extent to which she is acting through a "revelation of God", since that would be the only valid legitimation for her to present her printed message to the Council. His repeated questions are not only meant to clarify the extent to which Poole is acting as a prophet: they are also, in themselves, visible proof of his scepticism before her, and part of an attempt to discredit her publicly by putting her authority in doubt.

PUBLIC INTERVENTION IN PRINT

Seventeenth-century prophesying by women is not only a form of public intervention that would further develop into the 18th and 19th centuries—it is by dint of its prevalence in print, a form of modern authorship. The case of Elizabeth Poole illustrates the typical kind of business contract that women prophets established with their printing networks, many of them affiliated in one way or another with sectarian groups: the prophetess relayed her message in public, and it was soon afterwards printed by a printing house that incurred its cost and took charge of distributing it. Many of these pamphlets were either included in broadsheets (sold in the streets for less than a farthing) or distributed for free among sectarians. Even though there is no evidence that women prophets and pamphleteers received money from their writings, most of these grassroots writers considered themselves well-paid because they were published, heard, and taken into account in the public arena without having to pay any amount for it. Often these sectarian printers earned money from their regular printing activities of standard materials (such as regular newspapers), which allowed them to incur the cost of prophetic writings.

The mid seventeenth century was still a far cry from being a fully secularised arena, or even a space where women could be heard on equal footing with men. Despite her relatively privileged platform in her works, Poole had to justify her public interventions on the basis of her visionary status. The implicit vindication of her capacity in *Another Alarum of War*, in the face of open disregard, shows that she was well aware of the gender constraints that conditioned her audience's response. When Colonel Deane discredits her authority as a prophetess, implying that her anti regicidal discourse cannot come from God, Poole is neither ashamed of the complex nuances of her prophetic utterance nor of its rationale. Her personalized discourse has conflated her prophetic and her authorial selves, where listeners do no longer know when the former ends and the latter begins.

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