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NEW EVIDENCE FOR THE READING OF SECTARIAN WOMEN'S PROPHECIES

The turbulent period of the mid-seventeenth century gave rise to a great number of radical religious sects – Fifth Monarchists, Diggers, Ranters, Quakers, Baptists, and others – who communicated their messages through public preaching and printed tracts. Women often played an active role in these sects: in particular, those who spoke out and/or wrote as prophets, circumventing traditional restrictions on women's speech by apparently serving as direct conduits for the Holy Spirit. The current evidence for how their works were received is scanty and focused on a brief period of controversy surrounding their active prophetic careers. However, a collection of three such pamphlets held in the Edinburgh University Library (*z.8.1/1) contains two pages of manuscript on its flyleaf titled 'a 'Memorandum' to the reidar of this book' (transcribed below), which suggests that these women's prophecies – usually regarded as topical or ephemeral – were in fact still being read and circulated for some time after their publication.¹

Bound together and trimmed to 14.5 by 18cm, the volume contains Anna Trapnel's *Report and Plea* and *The Cry of a Stone* with the only known copy of Anne Wentworth's *England's Spirituall Pill*. Apart from an early-nineteenth-century Edinburgh University Library shelfmark, nothing is currently known about this book's provenance; however, the

¹ I am grateful to Joe Marshall at the University of Edinburgh Special Collections for drawing my attention to this volume, and to Dr. Suzanne Trill for her help at all stages of the project.

'Memorandum's' hand (mixed with strong secretary influences on letters like *t*, *v*, *w*, *c* and backward *e*), along with contextual evidence, date this preface to the end of the seventeenth century. Its contents suggest that, for at least one reader, Trapnel and Wentworth's prophecies continued to have contemporary relevance even in the late 1680s, thirty-five years after the first of the texts was published. It also provides a potentially broader context for the cause of female Protestant visionaries and the response to it, on the Continent and in Scotland.

The 'Memorandum' acts as an introduction and gives instructions for someone first encountering the collection – it not only outlines the chronological order in which the texts should be read, but relates them to their historical and religious settings. It explains, for example, the source of the title for *The Cry of a Stone*. Hilary Hinds, Trapnel's modern editor, follows Sue Wiseman in tracing it to the apocryphal Second Book of Esdras, where 'the stone shall give his voice' is one of the signs of the coming apocalypse.² While this would be in keeping with the Fifth Monarchists' millenarian predictions, the 'Memorandum' gives a different source, paraphrasing Luke 19:29-40 (lines 17-23). This explanation seems at least as likely, suggesting as it does the failings of the established clergy that, according to the 'Memorandum'-writer, provided the background for Trapnel's preaching.³

In introducing Trapnel's *The Cry of a Stone* and *Report and Plea*, the 'Memorandum'-writer takes care to set these texts within their historical context for a new readership, which is less necessary for the more recent and less political Wentworth. While indirect, lines 6-10 seem to be a clear reference to the dissolution of the Barebones Parliament and Oliver Cromwell becoming Lord Protector. It echoes the sense of betrayal felt by the Fifth Monarchists from Cromwell, the 'military men' and particularly the grandees at the head of

² H. Hinds, *The Cry of a Stone* (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000) 81; S. Wiseman, 'Unsilent instruments and the devil's cushions: authority in seventeenth-century women's prophetic discourse,' *New Feminist Discourses*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: Routledge, 1992) 176-196.

³ An earlier book that uses this title, in a very different context but to similar effect, had appeared in 1642: Robert Coachman's *The cry of a stone, or, A treatise; Shewing what is the right matter, forme, and government of the visible church of Christ* (London : Printed by R. Oulton and G. Dexter).

the New Model Army, as well as the established national clergy. Trapnel's condemnation of temporal/ religious authorities seems particularly important to the writer and is reiterated in the paragraph on Wentworth, so that, despite the historical gap between their original publication, the texts appear to address similar issues.

The preface does not claim a merely historical interest in presenting these texts: the 'Memorandum's author is clearly writing from a position of agreement and sympathy with Trapnel and Wentworth, and is creating a paratextual frame through which they might be similarly interpreted by a future readership. There are two paraphrases of Timothy 3:5 ('Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof'), a quotation which features in Wentworth's *Vindication* and the title page of Trapnel's *Report and Plea*, along with repeated mentions of religious 'formalities' – a central concern for both writers, and the national disease being diagnosed in *Englands Spirituall Pill*. The description of the texts as 'difense[s]' reflects their own sense of embattlement, while the section on the *Report and Plea* fully accepts Trapnel's version of events as a 'trew prophet'. Although difficult to read fully, the final paragraph in particular seems to stress the validity of radical visions against attacks and accusations of 'fanatisisme' from an unbelieving 'mob': these women's 'wreitings', the 'Memorandum' states, will 'speak for' them to readers who are not so close-minded.

One of the most interesting features of this 'Memorandum' is its date, in comparison to those of the pamphlets it introduces. Both the Trapnel texts appeared in 1654, at the height of Trapnel's preaching; while *England's Spirituall Pill* has no printing date, its last revelations are dated to late 1679; fifteen years after Trapnel's texts and in very different circumstances. The final sentence of the 'Memorandum', moreover, also includes a reference to 'Ispbell vincent the shipardice...in ffrance whom peter Iuriow pleads for.' This Pierre Jurieu was a prominent French Huguenot minister whose *Reflections...upon the strange and miraculous exstasies of Isabel Vincent*, composed in about 1688, was printed in an English translation the following year. The 'Memorandum'-writer likely read this translation, since he or she echoes its full title in describing how Trapnel 'in such trases did praying, preacch

and prophesie.' Thus, while the three pamphlets may have been brought together previously, 1689 is the earliest possible date for the composition of the 'Memorandum' itself. On the other hand, the present-tense reference to Jurieu and the hand suggest that it was not written very much later.

Modern criticism gives little evidence for an interest in radical prophecies at such a late period – at least in England. Although Trapnel and Wentworth were the focus of attention and controversy when their writings first appeared, this was fairly short-lived. The only mentions of Trapnel after 1660 are in James Heath's 1663 *Brief Chronicle of the Late Intestine War*, and Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, which draws upon it. Heath describes her as 'A Quaking Prophetess, named *Hannah Trapnel*' and Hobbes concludes that 'she and some of her Complices being imprison'd, we heard no more of her.'⁴ Thomas Tenison's *Of idolatry a discourse*, published in 1678, notes *A Legacy for Saints* in the margin as an example of misguided sectarian doctrine.⁵ All three of these texts allude to Trapnel's preaching as a bygone aberration rather than a current concern, and only one of them refers to her writings, which were never reprinted. While *The Cry of a Stone*, evidently her most popular work, is preserved in at least sixteen copies, the others currently number between one and six.

Even fewer copies exist of Wentworth's works, with only one or two surviving examples of each listed in the *Short-Title Catalogue, England's Spirituall Pill*, the last of them, appears to be unique to the Edinburgh volume. Wentworth's prophetic activity in the late 1670s was already quite unusual, since the introduction of the repressive Clarendon Code had caused sectarian groups to go underground, and she faced opposition from her husband and congregation. Although she attracted some notice for writing directly to Charles II, a government informer observed that her works had a relatively small print-run,

⁴ J. Heath, *A brief chronicle of the late intestine war in the three kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland* (London: Printed for Thomas Basset, 1676) 665-6; T. Hobbes, *The history of the civil wars of England from the year 1640-1660* ([London]: 1679) 263.

⁵ T. Tenison, *Of idolatry a discourse* (London : Printed for Francis Tyton, 1678) 209.

even at the height of her notoriety.⁶ Even before this, he wrote that 'Our friend Mrs. A. Wen[tworth's] friends begin to decline her predictions and her too; because she cannot or will not be positive when and what the great things she wrote about to the King will be'; there are no known references to her following the publication of *England's Spirituall Pill*.⁷ Against such circumstantial evidence, however, the 'Memorandum' indicates that there was a sympathetic audience for both Trapnel and Wentworth even in the late 1680s, and that these texts continued to be read for their contemporary relevance.

The anonymous author of the 'Memorandum' clearly had some connection to radical Protestant sects and an interest in ecstatic prophecy; in the description of attending meetings in London, for example, the writer deliberately tries to 'learne' of other experiences like Trapnel's. Apart from this it is impossible to determine much about the author of the 'Memorandum', including his or her gender. The focus on *female* prophets is interesting but not definitive, since many men participated in editing and publishing their texts, and would likely have formed most of their readership. Women were seen as particularly suitable to be the voices of prophecy: their 'lowly status' along with an 'irrational and emotional essence and lack of strong personal will could make them especially receptive to the external Voice of God.'⁸ Throughout, the 'Memorandum'-writer attributes primary agency to God in sending both women as an 'instrument' to 'Intimate' His message – they are the 'stones' that cry out when other authorities are silent. The lack of direct focus on Trapnel and Wentworth's gender, or any autobiographical detail apart from what is most relevant for an understanding of their texts, suggest that the 'Memorandum'-writer's interest is in their preaching rather than their personalities, which are in any case subordinated to the voice of God.

⁶ 'Some printed papers are out about Anne Wentworth's predictions and more to come. If you please to have any of them, I can send them. But 300 of the first are printed.' *Calendar of State Papers Domestic Series, March 1st, 1677, to February 28th, 1678*, ed. F.H. Blackburne Daniell (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1911) 529.

⁷ *Calendar* 478.

⁸ Elaine Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity: English Women's Writing 1646-1688* (London: Virago, 1988) 26.

The distinction between Trapnel and Wentworth's sectarian allegiances – Trapnel was a Fifth Monarchist, while Wentworth left a congregation of Particular Baptists – is not mentioned in the text, and is probably not a significant one in this period. Alongside general criticism of the established church, the only reference to a concrete sect in the 'Memorandum' is an obscure one to 'that societie of people in London Comonlie designed by the name of [Q]ueit singers,' which I have not been able to trace. In any case, the paragraph on Wentworth sees her message as applying to 'all the severall sects of Christianity in England' who may be guilty of 'formalities in religione.' Furthermore, the 'Memorandum' concludes with the mention of Pierre Jurieu, who wrote about the prosecution of Huguenots in Catholic France and described prophetic trances remarkably similar to Trapnel's in the mid-1680s. This expands the writer's interests beyond Commonwealth-era England to the broader cause of persecuted Protestant visionaries, and indicates that the modern narrative of women's prophecy may also benefit from making these inter-sectarian and international links.

In this context, the writer's connection to Scotland provides another suggestive avenue. Many of the spellings in the 'Memorandum', such as 'hir', 'wreitt', 'ocht' and 'reidar', suggest a writer of Scottish origin. While Scotland and its religious issues are never directly mentioned in the text, the two references to England (alongside France) may hint that it is being viewed from an outside perspective. Perhaps even more than the English radical sects, Scottish Presbyterians (or 'Covenanters') had suffered persecution during the Commonwealth and particularly after the Restoration, a period that became known as the Killing Time. Although almost no work has been done on the role of women's prophecy in Scottish religious discourse, such prophecies did exist, at least in manuscript.⁹ Rather than describing a bygone period of religious controversy, therefore, the writings of Anna Trapnel

⁹ At least six such manuscripts, dated to between 1651 and 1679, are held in the National Library of Scotland; named prophets include Barbara Peebles and Grizell Love. I am indebted to Suzanne Trill's 'Early Modern Women's Writing in the Edinburgh Archives: A Preliminary Checklist,' *Woman and the Feminine in Medieval and Early Modern Scotland*, eds. Sarah Dunnigan et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004) 201-25.

and Anne Wentworth could have been read for direct parallels to current concerns 'in such a tyme.'

Moreover, a composition date soon after 1689 would mean that the 'Memorandum' was written directly following the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, in which the Catholic James VII/II was overthrown to crown the Protestants William and Mary. In that context, Trapnel's response to Cromwell's government having 'much fallen and degenerat' could have served either as a justification for this coup or a warning to the newly re-established Scottish church, at a time of high hopes for Protestants. Rather than being relegated to the history of the Civil Wars or religious error, these texts have continued prophetic relevance for the 'Memorandum'-writer, and their collection into one volume implies that he or she expected a future audience for them in the reader(s) being addressed. Particularly interesting for the history of circulation and readership is the mention of Trapnel's *A Legacy for Saints* (lines 42-6), suggesting that the collector once had a full set of Trapnel's most prominent publications. Although he or she remembers *A Legacy* well enough to echo its subtitle ('Being several experiences of the dealings of God with Anna Trapnel'), however, it is not included in this volume because it has been lent 'as a choise piece to a frend' and never returned. While we cannot know at what point between 1654 and 1689 this loan had taken place, by keeping, binding, and composing a preface for this gathering of other 'choise piece[s]', the writer clearly anticipates that they may be appreciated by like-minded future readers. This text, therefore, opens a potentially fruitful field of enquiry about the continued readership and reception of Trapnel and Wentworth, and of prophetic texts by women generally, long after the end of their active careers.

Transcription

Spelling, capitalisation, punctuation and lineation have been retained from the original, with the single abbreviation (a tilde over 'comander') silently expanded. Line-fillers have been omitted. The break between recto and verso pages is marked with a dash.

Because of the difficulties of the handwriting and paper quality (particularly toward the end, where the writing becomes more cramped and cursive), conjectural readings are included in square brackets.

1. a 'Memorandum' to the reidar of this book
2. That the reidir doe first reid the last narrative in this
3. book and it Anna Trapnell Intitilat The cry of a stone
4. being wreittin by hir frends at hir first appearing in publik
5. at Westminster at the entrie to the lower house of parliament
6. The ministeres of the which parliament And their militarie
7. men being at that tyme Tempted with the height of this
8. world[e] prosperitie in anno 1653 had much fallen and
9. degenerat from their first sincere love to the gospell
10. and the inward power of godlines; And the most pairt of
11. the pulpite men, who ocht to be the watch-men in Israell
12. became tyme-servers and to say nothing that might
13. offend the Grandies. So it pleased the Lord to send the
14. meane Instrument Anna Trapnell a sillie woman To
15. Intimate to them how God was offended That their former
16. zeale was degenerat into outward formalitie without the
17. trev lyff and power of godlines. According to that saying
18. of oure saviour in the gospell at his last entrie to Ierusalem

19. In respect that the leuisch clergie did not honour him with
 20. Devosaune Thirfore the meane vulgar people and litill
 21. childrene did it And he said if they did it not the verie
 22. stones would cry out. And so this last defense hes the
 23. titill of The cry of a stone.
 24. And as in all aidges all trew prophets have suffered
 25. persequition from those againes whoise doeings the
 26. prophets did speak or wreitt, So this Anna Trapnell
 27. hes sett doun the whole storie of hir persequitione from
 28. the militarie persones and their commander in cheif against
 29. whom schee prophesied And from such of the clergie of
 30. England who lived ane opulent easie lyf vnder them
 31. who ordinarlie ar flatterers of fortunat militarie persones

 32. The narrative of which persequitione is
 33. it heir first sett doun Bearing this titill
 34. Anna Trapnells Report and Plea.
 35. Schee was the first of that societie of people
 36. in London Comonlie designed by the name of
 37. [Q]ueit singers But for ocht that I know of
 38. Them for I have seine them divers tymes in their
 39. metings in London But never could learne
 40. that any of them war [cagt] in transes as schee
 41. was and in such transes did praying, preacch
 42. and prophesie as schee often did. Also schee
 43. wreitt a book of hir experiences of Gods
 44. mercie and dealing with hir wherin it pleased

45. God to opin divers scripturall misteries to
46. hir, I once had it but I lent it as a choise peice
47. to a frend but it was never restored to me
48. And as concerning the other difense in this
49. book of Anna Wentworth whom it pleased the
50. lord to send To Intimat to all the severall sects
51. of Christianity in England how that God is
52. heighlie provoked with their formalities in
53. religione without the lyff and power their of
54. But lett hir wreitings speak for hir to such as
55. doe not content them selves with [imptie] faith
56. and [reyl] in [o---- ---aces], And often mak a
57. mob of such a [chuns] as any to heir Christs spirit
58. speking in their spirit and that they beleiv his
59. voice be any other voice. Such mobers call all
60. that fanatisisme. evin Ispbell vincent the shipardice
61. in province in ffrance whom peter luriow pleads
62. for as divyune-sent in such a tyme in ffrance