A Resounding God: Acoustic Representations of the Divine in Early Modern Women's Spiritual Writing

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The central position of religion in forging early modern identities has been widely recognized as a space for dispute, politics, information, and control. For spiritual women in particular, whether as members of religious orders, mystics, churchgoers, sectaries, wives, and mothers, religion could also bring edification and self-knowledge when they expressed their faith in writing. Since late Medieval Christianity (1200-1450), mystical theology regarded highly emotional reactions to religion as evidence of divine presence, usually triggered by a series of devotional practices eliciting an affective response to episodes of Jesus' life in the Bible through visualization and mental concentration. These practices did not disappear with the Reformation, although it brought a reformulation of the ways in which the body and the senses engaged with the physical world to foster spiritual awareness. The idea that early Protestants rejected ritual and the cult of images in order to give precedence to the word of God –according to the doctrine of *sola scriptura*– is now nuanced by scholarship that recognizes that religious experience was largely mediated by sensorial discourses, spanning the traditional divide between Reformed, Catholic, and Orthodox strands of Christian faith.[1] An oral response to reading Scripture or hearing a sermon could be a transformative source of spiritual insight, as recent work on

[1] See discussions on the senses and ritualized forms of religious experience in Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 203; Wietse de Boer and Christine Göttler, "The Sacred and the Senses in an Age of Reform," in *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe,* eds. Wietse de Boer, Christine Göttler (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1-13; Nicky Hallett, *The Senses in Religious Communities, 1600-1800* (London: Routledge, 2013), 14-21; Patricia Dailey, "The Body and Its Senses," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, eds. Amy Hollywood, Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 264-76.

sermons and their audiences in the early modern period has shown.[2] The verbal stimuli would help establish a mental rapport with God, a double-voice that conflated individual will with divine mandate and configured the dialogical space in which wisdom was imparted. The sense of hearing, according to Bacon's *Sylva Sylvarum,* "striketh the spirits more immediately than the other senses"[3] travelling through waves of air, but once sound reaches the listener, it fades and disappears. Since sound could not be recorded or reproduced, its ability to remain in the mind of the hearer enhanced its effect in the spirit.[4] A common feature of women's spiritual writings across different traditions of faith is to regard sound as an utterance or a form of speech that is produced by God though human agency, or a medium of communication with the divine whereby the individual feels united with the Creator in a mimetic relationship with sound. The mystical experience challenges language and words do not suffice to articulate that which is "ineffable."[5] Moreover, the insights earned from this encounter are revelations that defy rational thinking, and a sense of deep truth is reached intuitively.

Although in the last thirty years studies on women mystics and prophets have offered important insights into their corpus of writings, their theology, visionary status, and connections with

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[2] Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and their Audiences, 1590-1640* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 9; Andrew Cambers, *Godly Reading: Print, Manuscript and Puritanism in England, 1580-1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 165.

[3] Sir Francis Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum: or A Natural Historie in Ten Centuries* (London: Printed for B. Griffin, 1685), 45.

[4] Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 98.

[5] For definitions of prophecy and mystical theology, see Diane Purkiss, "Producing the Voice, Consuming the Body: Women Prophets of the Seventeenth Century," in *Women, Writing, History 1640-1740,* eds. Isobel Grundy and Susan Wiseman (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 139; Laura S. Nasrallah, *An Ecstasy of Folly: Prophecy and Authority in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Theological Studies, 2003), 1; Jan Wojcik and Raymond-Jean Frontain, *Poetic Prophecy in Western Literature* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1984), 9. William Harmless, *Mystics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

authorial control and authority,[6] the relationship with sound and its mental resonance in early modern forms of lived spirituality remains an underrepresented aspect of our understanding of women's religious writings and their construction of the divine. In a culture in which women's voices were absent from public debates and silence was prescribed as an appropriate feminine behavior on account of St Paul's well-known injunction to the Corinthians,[7] the fashioning of God as primeval sound –and not only as vision– located one's authorial voice as emanating from the soul.[8] Attending to the soundscapes that come with revelation and linger in the experiencer's mind, this essay will pay

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[6] For early anthologies that included prophetic texts in English, see Betty Travitsky, *The Paradise of Women: Writings by Englishwomen in the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Moira Ferguson, *First Feminists: British Women Writers 1578-1799* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Elaine Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity: English Women's Writing 1646-1688* (London: Virago Press, 1988); for studies on prophecy, see Hilary Hinds, *God's Englishwomen: Seventeenth-century Radical Sectarian Writing and Feminist Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Teresa Feroli, *Political Speaking Justified: Women Prophets and the English Revolution* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006); for monographs on specific communities, see Catie Gill, *Women in the Seventeenth-century Quaker Community: A Literary Study of Political Identities, 1650-1700* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005); Rachel Adcock, *Baptist Women's Writings in Revolutionary Culture, 1640-1680* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015); for recent studies on early modern prophecy and mysticism, see Elizabeth Bouldin, *Women Prophets and Radical Protestantism in the British Atlantic World 1640-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Carme Font, *Women's Prophetic Writings in Seventeenth-Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 2017); Lionel Laborie, Ariel Hessayon, eds. *Early Modern Prophecies in Transnational, National and Regional Contexts* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

[7] 1 Cor. 14:34, *KJV:* "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law."

[8] On women and Biblical speech, see Michele Osherow, *Biblical Women's Voices in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); Victoria Brownlee and Laura Gallagher, eds., *Biblical Women in Early Modern Literary Culture, 1500-1700* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 25-40. For studies on the paradoxes of silence and speech, see Christina Luckyj, *A Moving Retoricke: Gender and Silence in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 121-125.

attention to a variety of sonic representations of the sacred in writings from early modern women flourishing in different Christian denominations and linguistic contexts. It will showcase the wealth of inflections in which the mental perception of sound becomes a sign of God's overwhelming presence and configures the genesis of women's spiritual message as well as their claims to moral authority.

The Sounds in the Mind

For mystics and prophets, sounds inhabit a liminal zone between individual perception and collective experience. As such, these must be grasped, heard, and interpreted by the mind, which filters the information coming from the senses. This practice is often problematic, as the well-known Spanish nun and mystic Saint Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582) was perfectly aware. She set herself the task of describing the delusions that often take place in the mind when receiving "locutions" coming from benevolent spirits as opposed to those emanating from evil ones. They do not differ in the tone or in the volume of their voice. But when locutions are from God, Saint Teresa explains, they always come to pass and proved true, which is not the case if these are nefarious. In the event the communication is triggered by a specific request on the part of the individual, she continues, it is not uncommon to imagine hearing a voice telling that person whether his or her request or prayer will be fulfilled. An answer may be invented by the understanding, when the person "perceives the intellect ordering the words and speaking them."[9] Then, that same intellect at one point signals that the words heard are invented because they are imprecise and fanciful. They lack the clarity of the real, divine locution. When this happens, Saint Teresa advises to deflect our attention to something else, as we would do if we were speaking and suddenly keep quiet. The soundscape is transformed into a space of silence, where the individual can check upon the meaning of the statements heard. False locutions, however loud and discernible in one's mind, leave no effects, whereas when the Lord speaks, words and sounds lead to deeds. His voice is so clear that not a single syllable of what he says is lost. Saint Teresa

[9] Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself,* trans. J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin Classics, 1987), 176.

clarifies, though, that sound can only occur outside rapture and ecstasy, because when the soul is in total union with God, the discernment of senses is no longer possible. One is with God, and God is sound.

In the account of her 'intellectual' visions, that is, those that involve the faculties of the imagination and the senses, the Spanish nun María de Ágreda (1602-1665) defines them as being unmistakably sonic. Acting as a witness of events unfolding in her mind, these visions are not simply thought or imagined, but they can be heard and perceived as if taking place in the world. María hears how the holy Mary "enjoines the infernal dragons to become mute" after an atrocious combat in which their chains fell upon the earth with a stentorian blow. The struggle is over when the voice of an angel "resounded victoriously at his casting forth unto the earth and sea."[10] Often, a distinct godly pitch accompanies the wisdom emanating from these scenes. At other times, if emotions such as fear or self-doubt interfere with the divine mandate to write, a battle with "the beasts that try to snatch one's soul" takes place amid sighs and groans until María cries out from the bottom of her heart for help.[11] The voice of God answers immediately with a "strong and sweet voice," urging her not to wish to go outside God himself.[12] Being inside divinity, then, is an immersive experience of cacophony.

Capturing divine sound beyond the precinct of the mind, though, so that it might be heard by others, proves to be a difficult task unless it can be transformed into music. This conversion from mental to physical sound was precisely what the famous German Benedictine abbess and polymath Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) had sought to do five centuries earlier, adding to her extensive bibliography of philosophical and scientific tracts the composition of numerous hymns and sacred monophony that she left to posterity. Hildegard often heard the command of God as a voice coming from a storm-cloud "to speak these things that you see and hear." Music was for her a form of theology, as sound holds the power of creation: "Sound is the power of the Father, a cosmic music

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[10] Mary of Ágreda, *The Mystical City of God,* trans. Fr. George J. Blatter (Ogden, UT: Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2013), 35.

[11] Ágreda, "Mystical City", 52.

[12] Ágreda, "Mystical City", 70-72.

with which all creation echoes."[13] Her mind is filled with harmonic sounds that are a living proof of the relationship between the harmony of the spheres and that of the body and the soul. Music plays constantly in her mind for various purposes, as instructed by God: "I saw a bright layer of air in which I heard wonderfully diverse types of music: […] songs of praise for the joys of the citizens of heaven […] songs of lament […] and songs of exhortation for the Virtues."[14] Hildegard's musical compilation "Symphony of The Harmony of Celestial Revelations" (1158) gathers seventy-seven of her chants in praise of creation as she heard them in her mind.[15]

Celestial sound can reflect dissent and discord, too. The Venetian nun Arcangela Tarabotti (1604-1652), in her articulated defense of women as belonging to the "human species," inhabits a mental space in which she enacts her anger in the form of convincing logical arguments "shouted" at God, especially when she questions theological precepts concerning the "scientific operations of the intellect in women."[16] Her rapport with the divine takes place almost single-handedly, and her soundscape is self-created in order to call the attention of divinity. The reader perceives Tarabotti's anger in her forceful curse of Adam and by extension to all men for debasing women and not attending to Eve's voice.[17] Hers is the wrath of a nun pronouncing the fateful sentence in Genesis 3:18 against Adam, the eloquent roar of a woman who dares to replace male Biblical authority. The voice that she

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[13] Hildegard of Bingen, *Epistle 1,* trans. Joseph L. Baird, Radd K. Ehrman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 28.

[14] Hildegard of Bingen, *Selected Writings,* trans. Mark Atherton (London: Penguin, 2001), 29.

[15] Hildegard of Bingen. "Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations," CD-ROM (Tucson, AZ: Celestial Harmonies) 1996. See also *Symphonia: A Critical Edition of the Symphonia Armonie Celestium Revelationum,* ed. Barbara Newman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

[16] Arcangela Tarabotti [pseud. Galerana Barcitotti], *La semplicità ingannata* (Leiden: Gio Sambix, pseud. Johannes and Daniel Elzevier, 1654), 28. My translation.

[17] "Frà tanto à te, Adamo, che ascoltalti le voci della tua moglie, per poi servirtene à deprimerla, predico le mie maledittioni. Maledicta terra inopere tuo, spinas & tribulos germinabit tibi." Arcangela Tarabotti, *La semplicità ingannata*, 29 B3. My translation.

projects and hears is that of her own outrage in seeking to establish a rapport with the divine on her own terms.

Biblical passages may also be conveyed boisterously and publicly when God wishes to make a point. Scriptural language is a verbal proof of God's speech, and it may crowd and dominate the mental dialogue between divinity and the self. The prophetess Anna Trapnel (*fl.* 1650), in the course of a prophecy she relayed in public for several days in Whitehall, and put into writing by an intermediary or *relator*, pronounces her quotes from the Bible to validate her prophetic voice, thus strengthening her overt criticism of the government. The legitimacy of prophetic texts within the context of the radical sects depended on those texts being accepted as God's word rather than the author's interpretation of that word. For Trapnel, this authority comes as well from emphasizing the acoustic nature of her prophetic experience. At first, she hears a message in a "small voice," and she cannot possibly be convinced of her origin until that faint sound transforms itself into an echo that keeps repeating that "Christ is thine and thou are his."[18] Trapnel's body is emptied for several days, and only the voice with a message remains in her. She is the oral embodiment of the message, everything around her is sound, even when her mind is confused about its provenance. The intensity of the sound comes and goes but is ever present. Her voice makes it "[fall] into her breast" and become almost inaudible to her and her audience, or she may sing and raise the pitch of her voice to mark an important point, a voice that comes with so much power that it may break the Cedars.[19] Trapnel even establishes a typological comparison with the prophet David and his lyre, tapping into an orphic tradition of overcoming obstacles through music.[20] It is the harmonic sound of the voice she hears and conveys to others that prevents Quakers from meddling with her divine message.

Of all the radical sects in England in the 1650s and 1660s, the Quakers were the most articulate in the expression of their inner light, which usually took on the form of a dramatic exchange

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[18] Anna Trapnel, *A Legacy for Saints; Being Several Experiences and Dealings with God with Anna Trapnel in and after her Conversion* (London: Thomas Brewster, 1654), 7.

[19] Anna Trapnel, *The Cry of a Stone. Or A Relation of Something Spoken in Whitehall* (London, 1654), 63.

[20] Anna Trapnel, *A Lively Voice for the King of Saints and Nations* (London, 1657), 70.

between Quakers and their opponents, normally church authorities who sought to silence them. For Baptist women experiencing election, voices also crowded their whole being. Jane Turner (*fl.* 1650s) was convinced that "faith comes by hearing" only.[21] Her ultra-prophetic view relied exclusively on the perception of truthfulness in the voice of the spirit, that same voice that guided her experience of election. Of course, her near-antinomian stance led her to express distrust of any form of imparted doctrine, and of other people's experience of election when it was not sanctioned by one's own voice. For Turner, third-party exposure to the word of God can be a hindrance to spiritual understanding. God may speak to many, but only "true hearing" imparts wisdom to the person, as the divine voice ends up dwelling in the individual in a synergic relationship.[22] Sometimes, the listener must learn to distinguish the rhetorical inflections of the spiritual message, as it was the case with the Baptist Anne Wentworth (*fl.* 1660). Her long experience of marital abuse led her to find solace in a voice of God that "sometimes speaks in a literall manner, and in another that is mystical."[23] She could hear the lamentations of a full city before God could speak to her in a stentorian voice, and when that happened, she felt empowered to share some of the saddest episodes in her life to anyone who would listen. The strength of this voice and its ethical stance prompted her to write about her experiences for the benefit of others in an act of poetic and restorative justice. God's voice is, also, the voice of abused women.

The voice of God could indeed manifest itself in mundane settings, as it was the case with a young Jane Lead (1624-1704), who went through an experience of revelation while she was dancing in a party. Lead heard the "unmistakable" voice of God speaking to her amidst music and noise: "Cease from this, I have another dance to lead thee in; for this is vanity."[24] That voice announced cryptically her future mission or "dance," and also mentioned the verb "lead" even when Jane could not possibly

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[21] Jane Turner. *Choice Experiences of the Kind Dealings of God before, in, and after Conversion* (London: printed by H. Hils, 1653), 90.

[22] Turner, "Choice Experiences," 59.

[23] Anne Wentworth, *England's Spiritual Pill* (London, 1679), 7.

[24] Jane Lead, *The Wars of David and the Peaceable Reign of Solomon* (London: Thos. Wood, 1816 [1700]), 21.

know yet that her married name would be Lead. Lead's writings, influenced by Behmenist currents in the Philadelphian movement she led, stand out for their abundant sensorial content, from cosmic travel to bilocation, ekphrases and, of course, the renderings of a divine voice, which characteristically speaks to her in a "figurative and parabolical" manner and can be either male or female.[25] Its sound hides a mystery, an exegesis that she must learn to interpret. Communion with the divine requires a cognitive effort, the raising of one's mind beyond ordinary meaning in order to train the soul into a true sense of oneness with the divine. Sensible images and sound cease, and "all is turned into an intellectual sight, operation, and sensation."[26] Another Philadelphian contemporary with Lead, Elizabeth Glover (*fl.* 1694), shows more restraint in her visions, but is equally concerned about how the voice from the Bible transforms the individual. She can recognize the voice of God in her mind, overruling any other sounds that manifest themselves as voices from the Revelations, because God's was "differing from all other that ever I heard in all my life-time."[27] From then on, her godly voice became "a perpetual law in her soul," a perennial presence in her being.[28]

Beyond the context of radical sects in Britain, the French mystic Madame Jeanne Guyon (1648-1717), a believer in salvation through grace and not through works, and influenced by Quietist currents and the earlier work of Francis de Sales, believed that one should pray at all times in order not to detach oneself from the voice of God. However, Guyon's soundscape is paradoxically quiet and wordless, as divinity dwells and is actually heard in the deep silence of the soul: "The operation of grace is in silence, as it comes from God, and may it not reach and pass from soul to soul without the noise of words."[29] For Guyon, words are obstacles for the mind, because they give shape to mental images. She believes that paying attention to absence of sound while one is in prayer, and hence crowding the intellect with words, invokes real contact with divinity. Guyon's mind functions as an

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[25] Jane Lead, *A Fountain of Gardens* (London: printed by J. Bradford, 1696), 7-9.

[26] Lead, "Fountain of Gardens", 59.

[27] Elizabeth Glover, *The Angels Oath* (London: printed for the author, 1694), 27.

[28] Glover, "Angels Oath", 19.

[29] Jeanne Guyon, *Letters of Madame Guyon,* trans. P.L. Upham (Boston: Henry Hoyt, 1858), chapter 20.

anechoic chamber, where the holy word is isolated and sacred sound through which all creation resounds can manifest its pure essence.

This essay has mapped out a limited but representative sample of the large variety of devotional texts by women whose engagement with the acoustic dimension transcends the linguistic rendering of sound and speech to enact a full aural experience that articulates their communication with the divine and their authority in the text. A thorough reading of the representation of sound in these writings, a task still to be undertaken, reveals their ability to convey the overpowering presence of divine sound in the author's mind, opening up a typology of interactions ranging from filtering constant messages to discerning small voices, hearing "locutions," shouting curses, registering sudden raises in pitch and intensity, or being bombarded by city lamentations and incessant heavenly voices that turn into inspirational chanting effacing any surrounding noise. Adding the acoustic dimension to our reading of women's spiritual writings allows for a deeper understanding of the ways content was articulated beyond language to register the physicality of the act of hearing and the impact of the sound lingering in the mind, which in turn triggers a dialectical rapport conflating the narrative voice of the writer with sacred sound. Early modern women's spiritual writings thus emerge as a genre that, beyond the specificity of their religious tradition and denomination, goes beyond Biblically mediated manifestations of the sacred to undertake an exploration of the divine through sonic experiences.