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John Milton and the English Women Prophets

Joan Curbet

Institut d'Estudis Medievals, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 08193 Barcelona, Spain; joan.curbet@uab.cat

Abstract: The work of John Milton (both in poetry and prose) offered some striking theological and political innovations in the context of the seventeenth-century upheavals in England. This article aims to show that the work of the English women prophets active in England at the time offers a valid context in which to reassess and re-read Milton's work. This observation has occasionally been made in relation to specific prophets, but it has not been pursued in any detail. This article examines the concept of "prophecy" itself as formulated by Milton, and establishes its connections to the activity of women prophets; it also explores its connotations in terms of gender and its consequent implications in terms of opening the public and religious space to the work of female authors. It subsequently examines the work of two specific women prophets (Mary Pope and Elizabeth Avery) alongside that of Milton during the years 1647–1649, as offering equally legitimate responses to the debate concerning monarchy at the time, and it ends by examining Milton's final epic (*Paradise Regain'd*) as a poetic approach to the concept of female prophecy. The conclusion shows the renewed potential opened by this new research and considers its consequences for the seventeenth-century literary canon.

Keywords: John Milton; women prophets; prophecy; public space

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1. Introduction

In 1683, more than twenty years into the English Restoration, the woman prophet (or self-described as a prophet) Elizabeth Bathurst, belonging to an independent Philadelphian congregation, published in Shoreditch a compilation of inspired women's sayings and prophecies extracted from the Bible, in order to prove, as the title page states,

> . . .how the Lord poured out his Spirit upon the whole House of Israel; not only on the Male; but also on the Female; and made them Stewards of the Manifold Gifts of his Grace. . . so did all the Women who were wise at heart, manage their Particular Talents.[1] (Bathurst 1683, title page)

Scholars of seventeenth-century literature and theology will easily recognise in this brief text the presence of several subjects that recurred abundantly in the poetry and prose of John Milton, who had died only nine years before the publication of this short treatise: the literal, more than metaphoric, "pouring out" of the Spirit upon a chosen nation (Israel in this case, England in Milton's), and the assertion ("not only. . .but also") of some kind of spiritual equality between men and women; the moral need to put one's "Talents" (a key Miltonic term) to good and serious management in the service of God. It could perhaps be viable to see this series of thematic coincidences as being simply the proof of a common vocabulary extended across many religious denominations, but it is also possible to view it as the sign of a deeper set of concerns that Milton shared with English women prophets such as Bathurst, and perhaps more intensely with others that were active during his most productive years. The latter possibility is the one I aim to explore in the following pages, with a view to showing its relevance both to Miltonists and to seventeenth-century religious studies.

The second decade of the twenty-first century has witnessed a surprising profusion of new approaches to Milton, a few of them motivated by political changes in academia, but

all of them relevant insofar as they have managed to throw new light on the work of a poet whose potential for embracing and generating new interpretations seems inexhaustible. There is now an openly feminist Milton, a Milton committed to radical uncertainty, a gnostic Milton, a (bafflingly) atheist Milton, and a queer and queering Milton (respectively: Wittreich 1988; Herman 2005; Bryson 2012b—a chapter in Herman and Sauer, eds.; Bryson 2012a—an independent book of the same year; Orvis 2018). The present article will try to offer a more modest contribution to the religious contextualization of Milton and to the study of his relationship with the women writers of his time. To be sure, several major studies have by now been devoted to the continuities and debates (overt or covert) existing between the poet and specific female authors of his period, most of whom operated apart from radical or sectarian environments (among the most significant approaches, see McBride and Ulreich 1999, 2001; Polydorou 2002; Miller 2008, 2012; Norbrook 2013). But here I propose something different, a reading of Milton's concept of "prophecy" that sets it specifically in the context of the English women prophets active at the time of his career as a polemist and as a poet. Such a reading will suggest that there was a strong proximity, even acomplicity, between his use of this central concept and theirs, and will pave the way for a renewed perception of their joint participation in some central debates of the period (most notably, as I will show, in 1647–1649). This will also allow me to examine his development and refinement of the concept of "prophecy" in his last epic poem (*Paradise Regain'd*, 1671), where the relationship between womanhood and divinely inspired utterance becomes a matter of the utmost importance.

This is a kind of research that cannot be predicated on hard evidence. We do not have written proof of Milton's specific reaction to the publications of women prophets like Elizabeth Avery, Anna Trapnel, or Elizabeth Poole. Still, it is implausible that he could been unaware of their activity at the time of his polemical engagements against the authority of Laudian prelates or against pre-publication censorship, and even less during his activity as a licenser for the Commonwealth. The cultural significance of the seventeenth-century women prophets has been analysed extensively in the last decades in several landmark books, each of which has unearthed new and fascinating primary sources for study (see especially Mack 1992; Feroli 2006; Font 2017). Their thematic and/or theological proximity to Milton has, however, gone mostly undiscussed, with only a few significant exceptions (Loewenstein 2001; Wittreich 1998; Miller 2008). David Loewenstein, for instance, has richly explored the many links between Milton and the radical groups of the English Revolution, including passing references to figures like Lucy Hutchinson or Anna Trapnel (Loewenstein 2001), while Joseph Wittreich has offered a short but very suggestive study of the textual links between *Paradise Lost* and *A Fountain of Gardens* by the Restoration visionary Jane Lead (Wittreich 1998, pp. 251–55). Up to the present moment, Shannon Miller is the scholar who has dedicated the most careful attention to the relationship between the poet and the prophets of the revolutionary period, even though her chapter on the matter includes male prophets as well as female ones (Miller 2008, pp. 79–108).[2] Her contribution to the subject is in any case a major one, especially in what concerns gender issues, and will duly be referenced in the following pages, even at moments when I differ from her positions.

This article will show that there is a cluster of themes that keep shifting back and forth between Miton's writings and those by the prophetesses. This certainly does not imply an open agreement on Milton's part with any of the various sects to which these women belonged (indeed, he would have strongly objected, and occasionally did, to some specific points of their doctrines) but it clearly points to his closeness to them in terms of their occupation of public space, their understanding of prophetic experience, and their role in the denunciation of undue clerical authority. The later part of this article will concentrate on Miton's nuanced understanding of female prophecy as represented in *Paradise Regain'd*, where this subject becomes a major thematic concern, carefully and tactfully explored, though this aspect of the poem has been passed over in silence by critics until now.

Let me begin, however, by clarifying the role of the female prophetic utterance in the social and political contexts where Milton lived his intellectual life.

2. Strategic Positions: Opening the Public Space

John Milton's relatively late entrance into the political scene, with the publication of his anti-prelatical tracts of 1641–1642, already showed a clear interest in the free circulation of ideas which prefigured, as has often been noted, his programmatic defence of it in *Areopagitica* (see for instance the authoritative studies Hill 1979; Lewalski 2002). At that initial point his main objective was to join in the questioning of the Laudian church that was widespread among the Puritans, but his consideration of the radical or sectarian groups active in England, which justified the prelates' pointed emphasis on Church discipline, was notably conciliatory.[3] In *The Reason of Church-Government* (1642) he imagines the moment in which these groups, kept outside of the Church through clerical authority, will be received again in it. Theological differences will vanish or become unimportant once undue ideological control is removed. While not directly endorsing the uncontrolled growth of sects, his position at this moment is far more anti-clerical than anti-sectarian. The great theological enemies for him are both Catholicism and the slightly disguised Popery that the Church of England has adopted in its rituals.[4] His position on sects or schisms may certainly waver at times (most notably in *The Reason of Church Government*), and he may come to view these grassroots groups with distrust, but even in these cases he sees their presence as ultimately productive in the great and long process of the Reformation:

> As for those many sects and divisions rumor'd abroad to be amongst us, it is not hard to perceave that they are partly the meere fictions and false alarmes of the Prelates, thereby to cast amazements and panick terrors into the hearts of weaker Christians, that they should not venture to change the present deformity of the Church for fear of I know not what worse inconveniencies. . .But if sects and schismes be turbulent in the unsetl'd estate of a Church . . .it best beseems our Christian courage to think they are but as the throws and pangs that go before the birth of reformation, and that the work it selfe is now in doing. (Milton 1953, p. 173)

In a characteristically Miltonic gesture, the arguments of the prelates are first denounced as false and deceitful, then a grain of possible truth is identified among them, and finally even that figment is re-assimilated into the polemist's main position. If sectarians are in the wrong, then their public presence can still help honest Christians to find the truth, since dissensions are only natural in the "unsetl'd state of the Church" on the path towards "the birth of reformation".

These early positions are developed and expressed more systematically, of course, in *Areopagitica* (1644). In what concerns the potentially schismatic, independent movements operating at the grassroots level in England in the early 1640s, Milton's attitude is made even clearer there: Doctrinal purity and static obedience to clerical rules may constitute in themselves, far more than the attitude of these groups, the worst possible heresy: "A man may be heretick in the truth; and if he beleeve things only because his Pastor sayes so, or the Assembly so determins, without knowing other reason, though his belief be true, yet the verie truth he holds, becomes his heresie" (Milton 1957, p. 543). Official doctrinal pronouncements coming from the religious authorities are thus bracketed or relativised insofar as they may lead honest believers astray, or worse, blind them to their own personal conscience.[5]

I would suggest that these Miltonic positions establish an early *de facto* convergence of interests between him and the radical women prophets in 1640–1644, independently of the diverse groups to which the latter belonged. A notable increase in the production of books and pamphlets had occurred during the Long Parliament and had continued to rise spectacularly until the publication of *Areopagitica*, when calls for the licensing of Milton's own tracts (arising from the outrage around his divorce writings) moved him to oppose pre-publication censorship.[6] At this point, several women prophets had already claimed

a God-given right to occupy the public space and to address their potential audience orally and in print. By putting his main emphasis on the excesses of prelatical authority and on the identification of pre-publication censorship with popist practices, Milton was acknowledging the presence of free agents, including women writers, in the public arena, and their intervention in religious discussion. Apparent forms of "sect and schism" may be no more than straw-man definitions used by the Church prelates in order to enhance their own authority:

> Under these fantastic terrors of sect and schism, we wrong the earnest and zealous thirst after knowledge and understanding which God hath stirr'd up in this city. What some lament of, we rather should rejoyce at, should rather praise this pious forwardnes among men, to reassume the ill deputed care of their Religion into their own hands again. (Milton 1957, p. 554)

One possible reason for this open positioning towards potentially heretic groups may be Milton's own early leanings towards modes of thought that he knew to be heretic too (especially Arminianism, of which there are some noticeable signs in *Areopagitica*). Speculation cannot be allowed to go too far here, since firm textual evidence of Milton's awareness of this is lacking, but it is implausible that he could have failed to notice that a part of his own thinking might be classified by the prelates as being "schismatic" itself, as much or more as that of the women prophets.[7]

On the other hand, it is not possible to see *Areopagitica* as an unconditioned gesture on the part of a fully coherent defender of the free press (after Illo 1972 and especially Fish 2001, pp. 187–214). The treatise bears all the marks of Milton's struggle against government licensers, but also reveals his urge to prevent the circulation of Catholic or Philo-Catholic forms of thought; in a serious way, his urge for expanding the area of public debate is countered by an equally strong compulsion to short-circuit the spread of Catholic thought in printed form.[8] In the mid-1640s, Papism was for Milton the absolute "Other" that had to be excluded from public debate, so that public debate in itself could exist. Its prohibition was the very condition of possibility for a renewed circulation and exchange of ideas not only on the part of individual authors, but also of collaborative communities.[9] A similar connection between the assertion of radical attitudes and the explicit condemnation of Catholicism is characteristic of several women prophets of the 1640s, who saw the Church of England as a repressive institution that was rapidly becoming Papist itself. The polemicist and early Fifth-monarchist prophet Elizabeth Avery, for instance, openly identifies the English Church with Papacy in her *Scripture-prophecies Opened* (1647):

> Babylon, you see, is not only the church of Rome, which doth appear to all that are enlghtened to be so, because their Religion consists of so many particulars, which it is heedless for me to recite, being so well known to all: but Babylon doth more mystically appear to be in this present State and Church of England. I put them together, because they be so involved, that they make but one Beast. (Avery 1647, A 2).[10]

Elizabeth Avery is dramatically voicing the same point that underlies Milton's mistrust of Laudian clerics, the collusion between English prelacy and Catholic mentality. Avery goes on to relate the state of England in the 1640s to the fulfilment of the prophecies of Daniel (a *locus classicus* of popular prophecy during the Civil War) and insists upon the suffering of the godly people under the foot of "arbitrary power, which had not onely been in the Monarchical State, but in the foregoing Parliament of England, which. . .hath appeared to be Babylon in special manner" (Avery 1647, p. 15). Milton would certainly not have followed Avery in this specific assertion (indeed, in 1647 he was soon to embark on a protracted campaign of international propaganda and defence of Parliamentary politics), but the complaint against the excesses of absolutist power is also a fundamental piece of his rhetorical arsenal. Equally revealing is Avery's description of the process of printing and distribution of her materials as an intervention in the public sphere, which marks very precisely the shift from a limited audience to a potentially unlimited reception:

> These following letters were intended only for some particular Christians, but seeing that which is contained in them is of general concernment, I hereby present it to the view of all. . .I dare not conceal it in oblivion, but I must hold it forth to the view of the whole world, not fearing any thing in way of opposition from the creature. (Avery 1647, A 3).

The movement traced here by Avery will be reproduced in many of the prophetic treatises by women of this decade and of the next, and beyond the Restoration. There is an initial act of preaching that is confined to a very specific environment (a sect, in the eyes of the clergy. That act is then identified by the prophet or by her group as being "of general concernment", and in a second moment, it is printed and offered to a general audience. This public intervention is fearless and assertive. The author shows no fear of any "way of opposition", since her authority does not rest on herself, but on the animating spirit that has prompted her to speak in the first place. Avery was operating under a strong sense of personal obligation. As Teresa Feroli has put it, speaking of women prophets in general, "*commanded* by God to deliver messages of national import, these women *needed* to be believed, and thus *needed* to constitute themselves as politically viable speakers" (Feroli 2006, p. 15, emphases mine; and see also Font 2017, pp. 217–28). For Avery, printing and publication implied making a determined movement towards the occupation of a new site, no matter how modest, within the public space, which inevitably transforms and modifies it, while the new authorial voice opens itself readily to polemical attack. What is occurring here? That, in its very idiosyncratic way, Elizabeth Avery's publication is performing the kind of authorial entrance in the public space that Milton's *Areopagitica* was so enthusiastically calling for three years before.

Anna Trapnel, a Fifth-monarchist woman prophet who was drastically different to Avery in style and outlook, operating a few years later (in 1653, in the final period of the Rump Parliament, and situating herself in an explicitly anti-governmental position), can offer a striking similarity to the former author in what concerns the occupation of the public arena through printed publication. Trapnel's acts of prophecy were essentially oral and performative; their publication was a joint enterprise between her and her community, in which a space for her personal authority was nevertheless preserved.[11] This is the second paragraph of her pamphlet *The Cry of a Stone*, collecting some transcriptions of her improvised speeches that she delivered at Whitehall in 1653:

> It was the desire of this Maid to present this her Testimony to you, though it is not for you only, but for all. If any may be offended at her Songs; of such it is demanded, If they know What it is to be filled with the Spirit, to be in the Mount with God, to be gathered up into the visions of God, then may they judge her; until then, let them wait in silence, and not judge in a matter that is above them. (Trapnel 2000, p. 3)

To be sure, the tone is here more defiant, more openly dismissive of sceptical questioners ("let them wait in silence, and not judge in a matter that is above them"), than it had been in the former prophet. But there is a sense in which both Trapnel and Avery, working from different positions and with different political agendas, can be seen as engaged in a wider transformative process: the broadening of the public space. It is certain that their respective religious communities play a key role in enabling them to do so. For both of these women, preaching to their immediate environment precedes any idea of publication. But it is also true for both that publication is essentially an extension of the act of preaching. Avery offers her letters, which were originally intended for a few readers only, "for the good of all", and Trapnel gets her prophecies printed so that their content may become known "not for you" (the specific reader) "only, but for all". In both cases, this over-arching "all" is, precisely because of its apparent lack of limits, the ultimate addressee of the speech act they engage in. The whole community of potential readers and/or listeners, which in turn constitutes the body of the nation. The immediate social contexts in which their prophecies originate thus branch out into a wider, far more complex space, in which they

can be read, assimilated, contradicted, attacked, disputed or simply ignored (the very space imagined and praised in Milton's *Areopagitica*). It is important to observe that the central dynamic at play here does not concern primarily the conceptual oppositions of male vs. female, even though those will unavoidably remain present. For the female prophetic subject, the essential demand to speak bypasses that binary dynamic and moves directly to another, more pressing one; that of individual voice (which could often be expressive, as well, of the collective demands of her sect) vs. political adversary. It is undoubtedly true that, as Teresa Feroli has put it following Phyllis Mack, "secular feminism can trace its roots back to the religiously based activism of the women prophets" (Feroli 2006, p. 32; and see also Mack 1992, p. 412); I add that this activism, and its role in the widening of public polemics and public space, can be seen and understood in the terms that had been defined and eulogized by John Milton at the beginning of the 1640s.

Each of the individual women speaking as a prophet in the mid-seventeenth-century was strongly individualised, and yet each of them felt enabled to speak beyond the dichotomies of gender, certainly not always erasing them (as the title of Margaret Fell's 1666 tract, *Women's Speaking Justified,* indicates), but also reaching beyond them in search of other pressing and wide-ranging forms of conflict and diatribe. One part of their purpose was to find a space for themselves in the *polis*, to address it and to contribute to its construction both in political and religious terms. To that extent, they were building positions that corresponded closely and firmly to those that John Milton had claimed for the public intellectual, beyond all sectarian divisions, in his early polemical writings.

3. The Experience of Prophecy

One of the most intriguing shared themes between John Milton and the women prophets concerns the nature of the inspirational moment giving rise to the prophetic utterance. There is no full continuity between his approach to this topic and theirs, in great part because of the difference between their respective experiences and the contexts where it occurs, but there is a major element in common: the potential of that moment to undo gender restrictions or to render them unstable.

Milton's approach to prophecy was, of course, strongly motivated by personal reasons. In his later years he was concerned with presenting it as a special utterance ordered by God that could occur either as public preaching (orally) or in the form of printed material, partly, no doubt, in order to make some room for his own works in that sacred category. He writes in *De Doctrina Christiana* (before 1658, unpublished):[12] "Extraordinary ministers are sent and inspired by God to set up or to reform the church by both preaching and by writing. To this class the prophets, apostles, evangelists and others of that kind belong" (Milton 1973, p. 332). But if the prophets voice the call of God, they themselves have been called upon by Him: it is through this call they are to be differentiated from the mass of the faithful, like the evangelists or the apostles were in their time, endowed with the same kind of authority that these once possessed. *Vocatio specialis* is the term used in *De Doctrina Christiana* in order to give a joint definition to these various forms of calling: "Special vocation means that God, whenever he chooses, invites certain selected individuals, either from the elect or from the reprobates, more clearly and more insistently than is normal" (Milton 1973, p. 455). Let us leave aside the suggestive idea that some of those who are invited by God may come from the ranks of the "reprobates". What matters to our purpose here is that, in any case, prophetic dignity has been granted to a few only, and that their authority is not given to them by the Christian community or by any human institution, but directly by God himself.

Milton clearly saw himself as having been called to a *vocatio specialis*, and the *persona* he assumed in his epic poetry and in some of his pamphlets responded self-consciously to that assumption. The voice of the Father in *Paradise Lost* phrases that same concept of vocation in no uncertain terms (III, 183–86): "Some I have chosen of peculiar grace/Elect above the rest, so is my will:/The rest shall hear me call, and oft be warned/Their sinful state…" (Milton 2007, p. 366). The Calvinist overtones of these lines have sometimes caused perplexity among Miltonists, because of their apparent incongruity within a poem

that is close to Arminianism (albeit in a *sui generis* form) in its doctrine. There is at present a critical consensus on the fact that these "elect" can be seen as "a category with which he complements an otherwise general Arminianist position" (Danielson 1982, p. 83; this position is largely shared by Fallon 1998, pp. 93–116). What is relevant to my purposes here is the insistence on a separate category and status for those who are called to perform acts of prophecy, or of reformation, or "others of that kind", as *De Doctrina Christiana* puts it.

How is this *vocatio specialis* voiced in the female authors of the period? How is the initial experience of that calling made manifest in the writings of women prophets? The initial moment of revelation concerns specifically the individual who has been singled out, and corresponds to the action of the Spirit upon her; an action that is ultimately empowering, but which may initially overcome her and seem to render her passive. Very often this moment takes the form of a vision that overtakes the subject unexpectedly, seeming to single her out and affecting her physically. The early Fifth-monarchist Elizabeth Poole speaks in 1648 of having been for a long time a "sad mourner" for the English land, abiding in sadness and eventually coming to suffer "the pangs of a travelling-woman", until, "after many dayes mourning, a vision was set before her, to shew her cure, and the manner of it" (Poole 1648, A2 r). It is only then that the prophetess feels fully empowered, and capable of addressing her readers (in this case, Cromwell's army) with full authority: "it is not the gift of faith in me, say I, nor the act of diligence in you, but dependence on the divine will, which calls me to beleeve, and you to act." (Poole 1648, A2 r).[13] The situational pattern of physical exhaustion or bodily pain leading to the moment of ecstatic vision is repeated in several other cases. In a public address made to the city of London around 1650, though printed only in 1676, Mary Adams explains her reception of visions in the following terms:[14]

> I have been often been wak'd out of sleep with Sorrow and Pain upon my Heart, my Spirit being under a Sense and a Burden because of these things; it lay upon me to declare the judgements of the Lord, as it hath been signified to me by Visions; and it hath laid with very much Weight upon my Spirit, night and day concerning these things... (Mary Adams 1676, pp. 5–6, *A Warning to the Inhabitants of England and London*)

Adams capitalises on a series of familiar metaphors that apparently intensify her gender (a "burden" that has been laid on her, a recurring sensation of "weigth" upon her, "sorrow and pain" perhaps similar to those preceding childbirth). Gender connotations are thus initially preserved in the subject's reception of the prophetic vision, but that vision eventually leads her towards a position of rhetorical dominance, which in turn will unify her audience (the whole city of London: "Oh London once more unto thee I speak!", she clarifies in the next page, Adams 1676, p. 7) beyond male/female differences. We do not have here only the familiar inversions of the weak vessel being filled with superior power, or (in the terms used by the Fifth-Monarchist Anna Trapnel) that of the small stone that was put away, but on which a temple shall be built. There is a further de-gendering here that turns the prophet's audience into a unified whole, in which the men and women of the listening community share an equal responsibility in its future.

It would be tempting to identify a repetitive thematic matrix here, in which the body of the female speaker seems to reproduce or rehearse pains similar to those of child-bearing before finally discharging the prophecy into the public arena. The inherent weakness or sensibility of the female body would thus tend to give a full somatic expression to her reception of the Spirit. Phyllis Mack has cannily observed that, in this respect, the image of the female visionary could be viewed "with respect, even envy, by those philosophers who felt alienated from God by their compulsive, prideful reliance on the power of their own reason" (Mack 1992, p. 33). Shannon Miller has also asserted that "women writers were allowed entry into this space in part because of the traditional associations of the female body with the weaker vessel" (Miller 2008, p. 80), and has backed this point with substantive examples. But her assertion should, I think, be slightly qualified: even though

this theme is visibly present in some female prophets, it is far from being dominant, or even prominent, in the bulk of their writings across radical communities.

It is conspicuously absent, for instance, in the majority of prophecies authored by Quaker women, despite the relevance of at least one major autor among them, Margaret Fell, whose tract *Women's Speaking Justified* (1666) certainly confronts male authority politically and challenges it on the grounds of the fleshly capacity of women to give life, and even of their physical proximity to Christ himself. More often, though, a seemingly unproblematic sequence of spontaneous vision followed by public utterance (in the form of a completed, printed published tract) is often repeated among their female authors, who seem to take their capacity to prophesy for granted.[15] Sarah Jones, in 1650, makes use of familiar maternal tropes but is careful to give them a purely spiritual significance, which avoids any connotation of a psycho-somatic response to the call she has felt: "I have received in the eternal council of the Lord, that which *lyes as a heavy weight* upon my spirit to be discharged" (Jones 1650, p. 2, emphasis mine). Her readers are metaphorically emptied of any power of aggression, turned into "weeping babes" or "dear lambs" on whom she longs to send the breath that she has received ("If I could breath forth the measure of life that I have received, to do the least babes good…", Jones 1650, p. 3). Writing only a few years afterwards, and belonging also to the notably active community of Quakers, Sarah Blackborow presents her visionary capacity as having come after an early desire to witness the presence of God, who came to her "between eight and nine years of age", beginning a period in which "long did my soul thirst after Him". The joyful experience of vision has afterwards been repeating itself "from my child-hood, and has begotten pure breathings and desires" (Blackborow 1658, p. 7). Very interestingly, and in full coherence with Quaker doctrine, Blackborow insists on the fact that her visionary experience does *not* single her out from her immediate community, but rather sets her as the example of a capacity that is open to *all who are willing* to receive it: "Wisdom hath uttered forth her Voice to you, but the eye and the ear which is abroad…is that which keeps you from the Teacher within you." (Blackborow 1658, p. 8). In a suggestive inversion, the capacity for experiencing vision does not have to be granted from outside in order to fill a passive subject/recipient: it is always already present and available to all those who are willing to open themselves to it.

Not all communities, however, offered or encouraged the same sense of self-assurance and strength.[16] Female prophecy often presents itself as opening a difficult new space for itself in the public arena, struggling against disbelief and distance: it sees itself as occurring outside of established preconceptions and having to overcome them forcefully. Therefore, the rhetoric of woman as a weak vessel and the inversion of hierarchies mentioned above (the low becoming the high through the action of the Spirit) still remains helpful for several authors and their respective groups, legitimising claims to public attention and protecting them against prejudice.

Hence the Baptist leader Hansard Knollys introduced in 1663 the work of the prophet Katherine Sutton (1663) (*A Christian Woman's Experiences*) by admitting that "many nay most godly Christians do not not believe that there is any such Spiritual Gift" as the inspired voice of the prophet he is presenting to the audience, yet "some few poor gracious humble soules have good Experience, that there is sometimes a measure of the Holy Spirit powred into them" (see cover, Figure 1).[17] Self-assured godliness is questioned, while humility is vindicated; this is made possible through the "powring" through which the Spirit dignifies and enables some of its vessels, acting beyond apparent gender differences. Yet, these differences are constantly remembered through Sutton's text, which establishes from its cover the credibility of its female writer through the authority of Luke 21:3 ("and they saw that *the woman* had told the truth", emphasis mine). The actual operations performed by the Spirit upon Sutton are all but unproblematic or comfortable. Constantly through her testimony, she responds physically either to the deprivation of God's presence or to its manifestation, losing sleep or hunger, crying immoderately from doubt or from joy and going through psycho-somatic manifestations of her intimate relationship with the inspiring force. The process of being filled by an external strength that is "powred" on

one's soul (the metaphor is ubiquitous in her text) has strong consequences on the body, which endures several forms of pain so that the female subject may become fully endowed with authority.

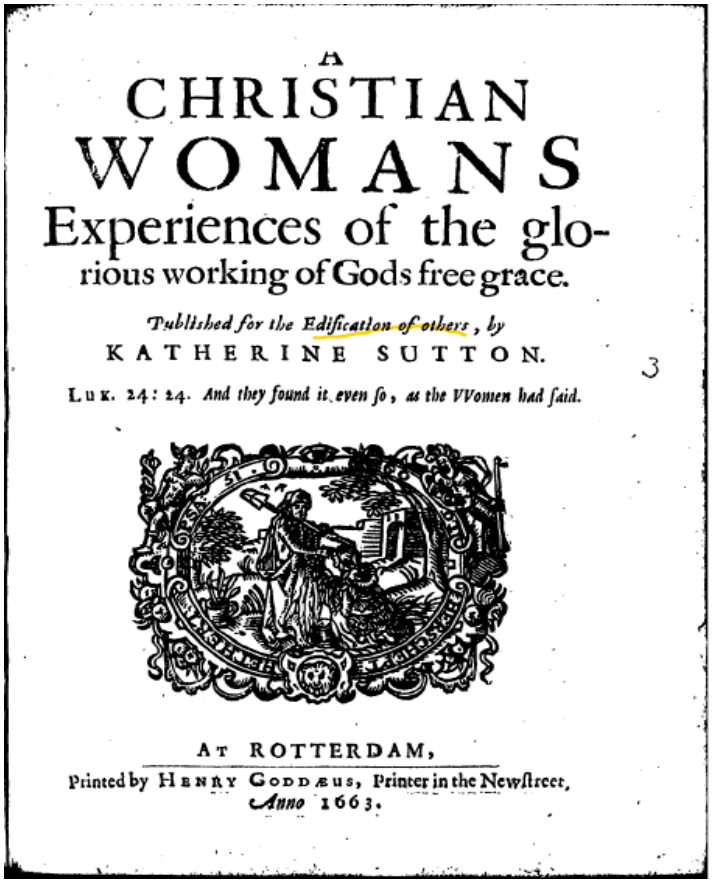

A
CHRISTIAN
WOMANS
Experiences of the glo-
rious working of Gods free grace.
Published for the Edification of others, by
KATHERINE SUTTON.
Luk. 24: 24. *And they found it even so, as the VVomen had said.*
3
AT ROTTERDAM,
Printed by HENRY GODDÆUS, Printer in the Newstreet,
Anno 1663.

Figure 1. Katherine Sutton. *A Christian Woman's Experiences.* 1663.

Yet, for all its embodied quality, to understand Sutton's experience of inspiration as a private and strictly individualised one would be to misread it. Prophetic inspiration is certainly lived in individual terms, but Sutton never loses sight of her exemplary condition and of her role as a model for at least two communities: that of her immediate Baptist congregation and that of all her potential English-speaking readers. As the cover states, the narration of the "workings of grace" in her is meant to work for the "edification" of others. The experience of the prophet is unique, yet it is meant to operate generally on the audience, to activate in the wider public their own disposition for the reception of grace. The cover design (see Figure 1) plays cannily with the superposition of two Biblical sources, Luke 23:4 and John 19:31, the first being visualised in the cover engraving, the second textually reproduced under it. Both references are about Mary Magdalen. The first one corresponds to her announcement of Christ's grave being empty (done along with Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others), but the second refers to her solitary encounter with the resurrected Christ, the famous "noli me tangere" moment in which she is told by him that he is about to ascend towards the Father. Image and text underscore heavily the female nature of the writer, reminding the reader of how often women are regarded with prejudice in matters of faith, but also establishing firmly how they can be singled out for a relationship of intimacy with their divine master ("rabouni" in Aramaic as Magdalen addressed him according to John's account), an intimacy that has turned Sutton into a magisterial voice for all potential readers. Such a position is granted to her, it is important to remember, not only by the individual inspiration that the text narrates, but by the firmly organised Baptist network within which she operates, and which is behind the

design of the cover and the distribution of the tract, and hence behind the creation of her public personality.

These various descriptions of prophetic inspiration speak of so many challenges to traditionally established gender discourse, and of the restrictive power it managed to preserve through the many political alterations of the mid-seventeenth century. But John Milton's own approach to the same concept was no less challenging; if anything, it occasionally managed to be more so. In relation to this subject, Shannon Miller has written about "the women prophets's representations of receiving God's inspiration being embedded in a stylistically gendered set of tropes that Milton deploys in his account of prophetic inspiration" (Miller 2008, p. 92). Miller examines this account, especially, as presented in the respective voices of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost* (Miller 2008, pp. 92–95). I would argue, however, that the truly revolutionary texts in this regard can be found elsewhere in that poem. In terms of the referents he seeks for himself throughout his early career, Milton's prophetic *persona* is undoubtedly masculine. He compares himself in *The Reason of Church Government* to Jeremiah and Isaiah, and in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* he evidently sees himself as a new Ezekiel. While these references are only to be expected of a male adult of his historical period trying to establish himself as one of God's chosen guides, his later verse description of inspiration is far more nuanced and complex, far less unequivocal in its gendering. The central text here is the initial invocation in *Paradise Lost*, in which the poet-prophet opens himself to the fertilising power of the Spirit, so that the poem may be born:

> And chiefly thou O Spirit, that dost prefer
>
> Before all temples th' upright heart and pure,
>
> *Instruct* me, for thou know'st; thou from the first
>
> Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
>
> Dove-like *satst brooding on the vast Abyss*
>
> *And mad'st it pregnant*: what in me is dark
>
> *Illumine*, what is low *raise and support*. . . (*PL* I: 17–23, emphases mine)

The three vocatives in this passage, all addressed to the Holy Spirit ("instruct me", "illumine", "raise and support", lines 19 and 23) occur around an evocation of the initial act of creation in Genesis 1:2. As Stephen Fallon has adequately noted, in the initial invocation, "the impregnation of the waters parallels the inspiration of the poet. . .Milton's audacity lies partly in his grasping in two hands and without apology the prophetic mantle" (Fallon 2007, p. 217). But there is more going on here than the simple assumption of a prophetic role. The metaphoric language is heavily charged with connotative power at this opening point, in ways that directly affect the gender discourse of the entire poem. That initial inspiration is imagined here as a vast, cosmic copulation between the impregnating force of the Spirit and the "Abyss" of Chaos (line 21): the former sits "with mighty wings out-spread" above the latter, and then proceeds to penetrate it with its animating strength. The outcome of this pregnancy is the cosmos itself, ordered and living, teeming with the new forms that constitute it.[18] This central image is surrounded by the above-mentioned vocatives, in which the poet-prophet posits his own person as the space that is now going to be spiritually impregnated. To that extent, he is metaphorically adopting a female position in the initial coupling (external power *coming into* the receiving mind, inspiring Spirit *coming into* the inspired subject) that is going to give life to *Paradise Lost*. This invocation is not the only image of intellectual pregnancy in the poem: indeed, Satan himself will give birth with his own body and soul to Sin, who comes fully armed out of his brain, in a spectacular scene that also plays surprisingly with gender roles and their inversión.[19] But the importance of the above-quoted lines is paramount for Milton's prophetic discourse: the poet who repeatedly assumes the mantle of an Old Testament patriarch in the epic, and who goes out of his way throughout the poem so as to present it as a prophetic utterance, assumes a metaphorically female position when receiving the initial inspiration for his task.

The *persona* that he later adopts before his audience may be male, but the representation of his inspirational impulse is carefully detached from his biological gender. It not only does not depend on it, but it figurally suspends it, leaving him ready to become pregnant with the utterance he is about to deliver. The poet-prophet may himself be a man, but his inspiration goes beyond gender roles and may easily decenter or invert them.

We might feel tempted to imagine (or even to deduce, if we choose to hold a psychoanalytic perspective) some "anxiety about the androgynous nature of the narrator in Book I" (Miller 2008, p. 97) on the part of the poet, given the radicality of the gender re-positioning that is taking place there. It seems to me, however, that such a re-positioning need not bring about any kind of self-doubt, overt or hidden, since it is the coherent result of a cosmological perspective that is of a piece with wider concerns in *Paradise Lost*. While Milton creates himself as a poet-prophet in that initial moment, he is also echoing, and to a certain extent repeating, the original divine act of creation. It must be remembered that the illumination of darkness by creation's light also becomes a major theme in book II of the poem, in one of its most challenging (or "sublime", to use an eighteenth-century term) scenes, where a seemingly endless abyss of undifferentiated dark matter is discovered by Satan at the beginning of his journey towards earth. What Satan strives to examine and understand at that point, to his utter amazement and that of the reader, is nothing other than that part of the universe over which the Spirit *did not* come to exert its animating influence at the beginning of time. But even though that vast dark space is yet untouched by the Spirit, it teems and pulsates with the potentiality of life. As Satan comes closer to its imprecise brink, it seems to vibrate with a constant and undefined movement:

> Into this wild abyss,
>
> *The womb of Nature*, and perhaps her grave,
>
> Of *neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire,*
>
> But all these in their *pregnant causes* mixt
>
> Confus'dly, and which thus must ever fight,
>
> Unless th' Almighty Maker them *ordain*
>
> *His dark materials to create more worlds*,
>
> Into this wild abyss the wary Fiend
>
> Stood on the brink of Hell and looked a while. . . (*PL* II: 910–18, emphases mine)

This is the constant mingling and separation of the elements ("sea","shore","air", "fire", line 912), the unending activity of the basic natural forces that Lucretius had described extendedly in *De Rerum Natura*.[20] All of this bodily space is not precisely alive, it is only potentially so, as the *pregnant causes* of life (line 913) keep mixing within it, without separation or order. The abyss of uncreated matter is one infinite, palpitating womb (the "womb of Nature", line 911) that is still waiting to receive the original fecundating force. This whole section of *Paradise Lost* is fully coherent with the initial (and above-quoted) invocation, in the first lines of Book I: the poet receives the light of the Spirit and this reception makes him pregnant with his epic, just like the initial uncreated matter, the "womb of Nature", was at one point made pregnant by the Spirit, and could still be made so in the immense areas that were left untouched at that point of origin (should "th'Almighty Maker them ordain/. . .to create more worlds", lines 915–16). It is essential to notice that the moment of inspiration involves, for Milton, not an act of *symbolic* penetration into the poet-prophet's body, but a *literal* one, insofar as both acts of conception (divine animation of uncreated matter, on the one hand, divine animation of the poet's being, on the other) involve in different degrees a *literal* reception of the Spirit in the elementary body, whether cosmic or human, that is ready to receive it.

All of this may seem to have brought us a far cry from the apparently more spontaneous, less contrived versions of inspiration described by the women prophets. But in fact

all of these versions (hers and Milton's) are more or less complex variations on a fundamental, common trope: the onset of the Spirit as a transformative power that reaches the chosen individual and renews him/her beyond his/her initial status (spiritual or social), making him/her ready to receive its transforming message and communicating it to others. Several of the women prophets express this impulse as the filling out of a vessel or a recipient, which may be re-made but may also be bruised or broken in the process; yet, because of their God-given authority, these "weaker vessels" become empowered speakers before a public space that they go on to address with full confidence. In the case of Milton, his gestures of prophetic empowerment lead him to assume an inspirational position that is female, readying himself for the fertilizing force of the Spirit and for a full poetic pregnancy. Far from undermining his authority in any way, however, this attitude marks out his extraordinary role as one who has received a unique form of *vocatio specialis*.

The English prophet (be it Milton or the women prophets) calls for the transformation of society, but he/she is also transformed (mentally, spiritually, on occasion even physically) in the act of calling. The consequences of this transformation for gender are not inscribed in the nature of prophecy from its Biblical origins: on the contrary, they must be seen as part of the re-negotiation of social boundaries that occurs in the rich fermentation of mid-seventeenth-century English culture. The English prophets, male and female, are all seriously engaged in a process of modification of the political and religious landscape. For some of them, and in different moments, that process may appear to be a more long-term project than for others (Milton certainly did not expect *Paradise Lost* to act as a force of immediate change in 1667), but the will to bring it to fruition is unswerving in all. In seeking to modify and transform the political body of the nation, its prophets necessarily have to alter its established gender politics, both for it and for themselves.

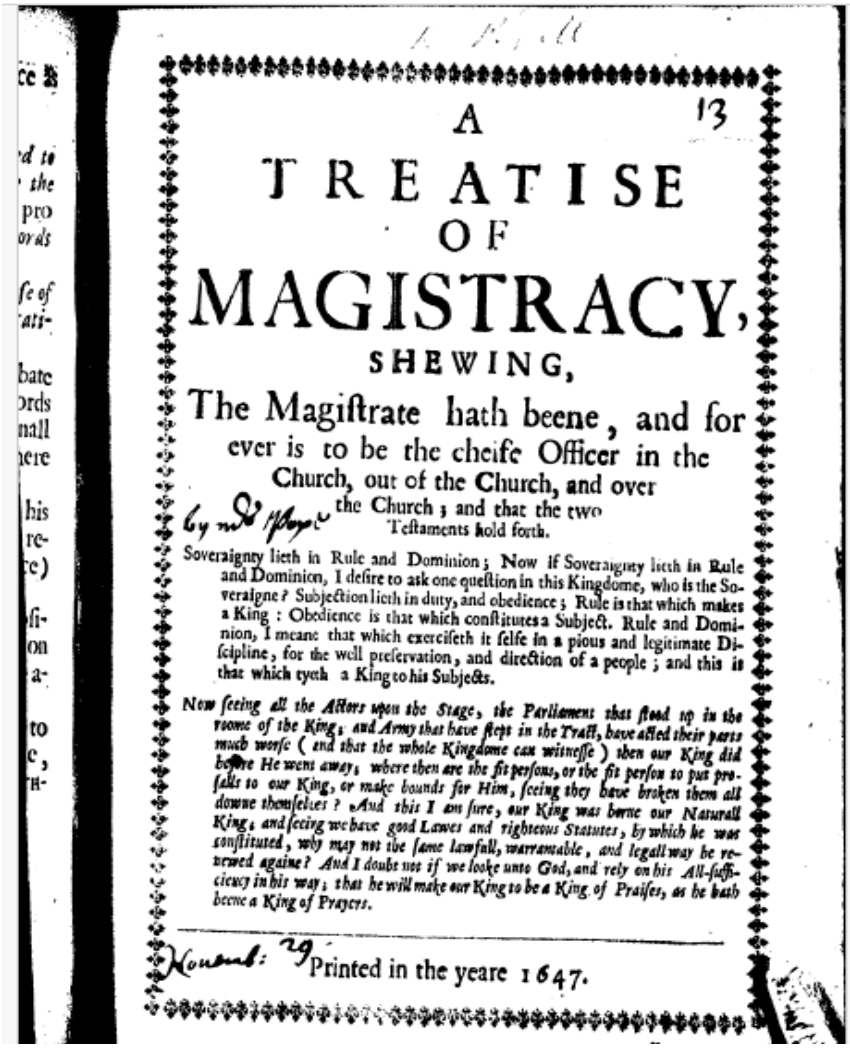
4. The Crisis of 1647–49: Mary Pope, Elizabeth Avery, John Milton

The bias of canonicity tends to limit and reduce our perspective of the historical past. John Milton's polemical writings of the 1640s, no matter how original and radical they may appear to us, did not occur in isolation, but were a significant part of the massive surge of printed interventions on political and religious of that decade, that he himself celebrated and encouraged. It is important to remember that some of his most pointed areas of polemical engagement were considered and addressed as well by the woman prophets operating at the time. To situate his positions in the specific context of theirs, who after all were writers working in his immediate vicinity, may lead to a more nuanced evaluation both of the extent and limits of his radicalism and of the variety of ideological options available at that moment.

Let us consider, for instance (since we only have the space for an example of the kind here) the heated debate concerning the authority of magistrates and of the king in 1647–1649. Milton had been steadily evolving through that decade from an initial support of the revolutionary Parliament towards a more determined accusation of the monarchic side and specifically of the king, whom he came to characterize in 1649 as a violent enemy of the nation, from whom state institutions had every obligation of defending themselves. The magistracy of the state had to be accountable for their actions as well, insofar as they had collaborated in the oppression of the Parliament and had presented their position as indebted to the divine authority of the monarch, a concept for which, in Milton's view, there was no firm Scriptural warrant. At that point there had been several interventions in the debate on the part of women self-presented as prophets, one of them authored by an independent visionary, Mary Pope (*A Treatise on Magistracy*, 1647, signed in its preface—see Figure 2) and another by a member of an early Fifth Monarchist group, the theologian Elizabeth Avery (*Scripture-Prophecies Opened*, 1647—see Figure 3).[21] For both of them, the form that the state was taking during the war was an urgent matter, not only because of their respective positions in the fringe of the Church of England (Pope) or directly outside it (Avery), but because they understood that moment as a turning point in the history of England, which would have lasting repercussions on the forms of religion authorized by

the state.[22] Pope actually uses the same image of the nation as the temple or building of God that Milton had used in *Areopagitica*, in order to present that period of turmoil as a necessary moment of institutional and spiritual cleansing:

> Now seeing that the birth of this building doth stick and lyes so heavily upon our Spirits, lives and livelihood, it is because there is much rubbish which lyeth in the way, and this rubbish hath a roote, which is injustice and the profanation of the Lord's day. . .ours is temporal and spiritual rubbish, which lyeth on the Spirits of people, both in the Common-wealth and in the Church. (Pope 1647, p. 2)



A 13

TREATISE
OF
MAGISTRACY,
SHEWING,

The Magistrate hath beene, and for ever is to be the cheife Officer in the Church, out of the Church, and over the Church; and that the two Testaments hold forth.

Soveraignty lieth in Rule and Dominion; Now if Soveraignty lieth in Rule and Dominion, I desire to ask one question in this Kingdome, who is the Soveraigne? Subjection lieth in duty, and obedience; Rule is that which makes a King: Obedience is that which constitutes a Subject. Rule and Dominion, I meane that which exerciseth it selfe in a pious and legitimate Discipline, for the well preservation, and direction of a people; and this is that which tyeth a King to his Subjects.

Now seeing all the Actors upon the Stage, the Parliament that stood up in the roome of the King, and Army that have stept in the Traill, have acted their parts much worse (and that the whole Kingdome can witnesse) then our King did before He went away, where then are the fit persons, or the fit person to put profalks to our King, or make bounds for Him, seeing they have broken them all downe themselves? And this I am sure, our King was borne our Naturall King, and seeing we have good Lawes and righteous Statutes, by which he was constituted, why may not the same lawfull, warrantable, and legall way be renewed againe? And I doubt not if we looke unto God, and rely on his All-sufficiency in his way; that he will make our King to be a King of Praises, as he hath beene a King of Prayers.

Printed in the yeare 1647.

Figure 2. Mary Pope. *A Treatise of Magistracy*. 1647.

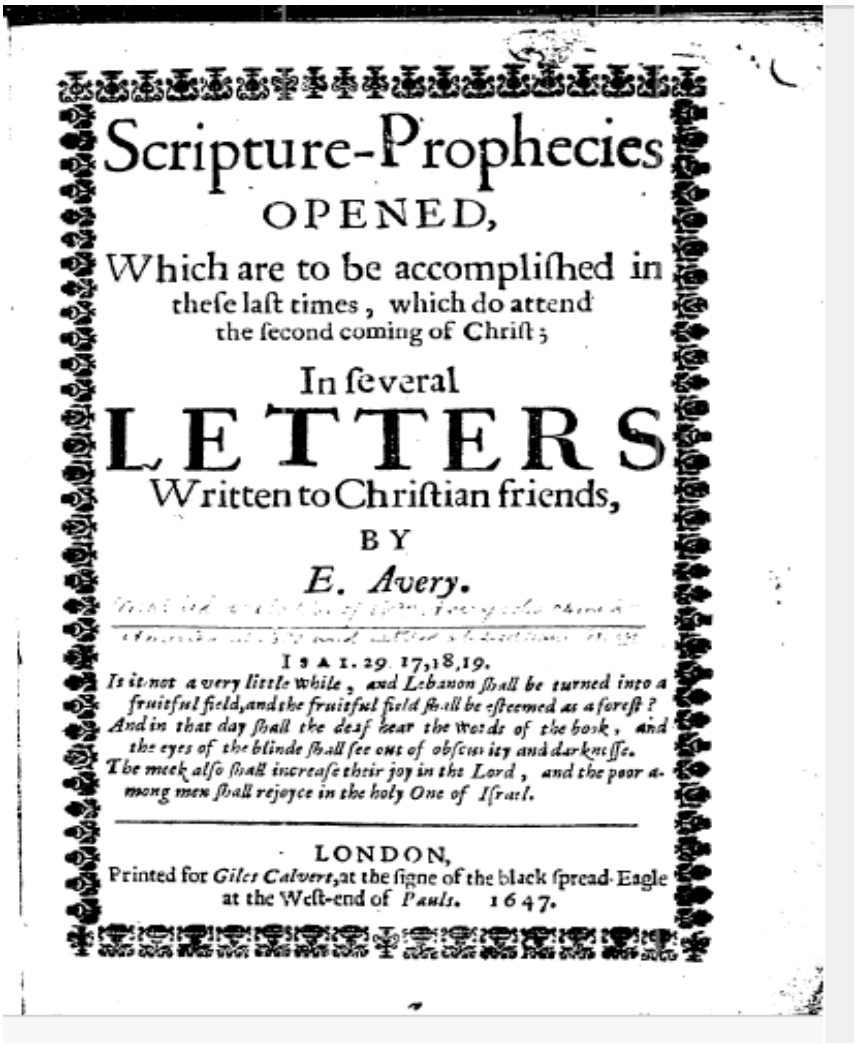

Scripture-Prophecies
OPENED,
Which are to be accompliſhed in
theſe laſt times, which do attend
the ſecond coming of Chriſt;
In ſeveral
LETTERS
Written to Chriſtian friends,
BY
E. Avery.
Isa 1. 29 17,18,19.
Is it not a very little while, and Lebanon ſhall be turned into a fruitful field, and the fruitful field ſhall be eſteemed as a foreſt? And in that day ſhall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blinde ſhall ſee out of obſcurity and darkneſſe. The meek alſo ſhall increaſe their joy in the Lord, and the poor among men ſhall rejoyce in the holy One of Iſrael.
LONDON,
Printed for Giles Calvert, at the ſigne of the black ſpread Eagle at the Weſt-end of Pauls. 1647.

Figure 3. Elizabeth Avery. *Scripture-Prophecies Opened*. 1647.

Milton had presented moments of collective debate and crisis as opportunities for the fruitful exchange between different and alternative positions. Pope sees her own immediate context as an opportunity for removing many hindrances to the full development of the state, which has become the "temporal and material rubbish" accumulating over the souls of the Commonwealth. It is no coincidence that she should present the "profanation of the Lord's day", or the multiple ways of celebrating the Sabbath in different congregations, as a dominant sign of this disarray. If mistrust and war have come, it has been because of the discord irresponsibly sown for a long time by inefficient prelates and careless administrators. "God hath always manifested himself in his Church to be a God of order and not of confusion", but the proliferation of different forms of interpretation of Scripture and of worship has brought about dissensions in the Church and within families: "The husband goeth to a Congregation, an the wife it may be to a second, and the children to a third, and the servants to a fourth" (Pope 1647, p. 4). The only solution to this progressive deterioration lies precisely in the hands of prelates and magistrates if they are willing to counter-balance the diversity of Biblical interpretations with the clear enforcement of the law ("under pretence of publishing the Gospel, that Law is put by", Avery 1647, p. 5), in order to bind again these diverse communities into one.

To be sure, Pope's position involves a much stronger support of the established structures of the state than Milton was willing to offer in the late 1640s. But if her defence of magistrature is more backward-looking than the poet's attacks on it, it is no less firmly grounded on Biblical authority. For her, Biblical interpretation is not a matter of discussion:

to familiarize oneself with scripture is to have access to a clear and firm understanding of human and divine hierarchies, and of the way in which they should be organized. If Pope participates in the public debate at all, it is because she has been moved by God into addressing the fall of England into anarchy, but she has no doubt that a better and more widespread knowledge of the Bible would rapidly bring the state into order. Indeed, when she anticipates the critical responses that will levelled against her, she imagines them to come as a result of a poor familiarity with sacred texts ("some will say, that these or such like of my writings are non-sense. . .But. . .if they would study the Scriptures as I doe, they shall finde the very good sense", Pope 1647, C4). The fundamental truths, insofar as they as preserved in the Bible, cannot be the subject of individual or Grupal interpretation:

> Is there any but the Papist that hold that they may give what sense of the Scriptures they will, or shall the judgements of any man, be the rule for God's unerring truth, or shall the the unerring truth be built upon the call of the ministry, or shall the Scriptures be this age wrested one way, or another age another way, like a nose of wax? Principles of nature vary not as languages does, and if principles of nature be inviolable, and indispensable, much more is Divinity. (Pope 1647, p. 32)

In an unwillingly ironic gesture, Pope levels against Catholics the same accusation that the latter had directed towards protestants for more than a century, that they promote a free interpretation of Scripture. There is a danger that the basic elements of doctrine might become too flexible, that they might be bent in alternative directions by different groups or generations, "like a nose of wax"; the surest way to prevent that tendency is to learn to rest on "inviolable" principles, to assert the "nature of things" against "opinion". Paradoxically, Pope's spirited participation in the religious and political debate is deeply motivated by a desire to limit and constrain that very debate. That desire is at one with the specific proposal she makes for the solution to the conflicts that are tearing England apart: a reconciliation between the Parliament and the King, in which the former will submit to the authority of the latter, which (as she sees it) can firmly be established on Biblical grounds. It is at these moments that Pope's positions on kingship become almost the reverse image of those held by Milton:

> According to Christs examples, the Apostles went on to confirm it in the Church and over the Church, and making it known as it doth appeare in many particular expressions of the Apostles. . .that Christ came not to abrogate or make void the supremacy of temporal kings, both in the Church and over the Church, he himselfe being the King of the Church, by lineal descent. (Pope 1647, p. 11)[23]

John Milton's position in the late 1640s is almost exactly the opposite of this. For him, the kingship of Christ does not necessarily "make void" (Pope's terms) the authority of all temporal monarchies, but it certainly brackets them and puts them under serious and permanent questioning, to the extent that they can only be justified insofar as they are useful to the people, and may be legitimately replaced at any moment by a Republican government. At the end of *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649), he comes to assert enthusiastically the monarchy of Christ to the detriment of temporal ones, even celebrating the final exclusion from it of those unfaithful servants who have failed to defend Jerusalem (England):

> Therefore he who is our only King, the root of David, and whose kingdom is eternal righteousness, with all those that war under him, whose happiness and final hopes are laid up in that only just and rightful kingdom (which we pray uncessantly may come soon, and in so praying wish hasty ruin and destruction to all Tyrants), even he our inmortal King, and all that love him, must of necessity have in abomination these blind and lame defenders of Jerusalem, as the soul of David hated them, and forbid them entrance into God's House, and his own. (Milton 1959, p. 256)

Even allowing for some rhetorical excess here, which befits the conclusive section of the treatise, there is a clear contrast between the concept of the "only just and righful kingdom" and all temporal ones, going even beyond those which are openly tyrannical. Milton here inserts his political project into a wider and all-encompassing desire that reaches beyond his immediate context, projecting itself towards an apocalyptic future that is arriving ("which we pray incessantly may come soon") but which has only begun to manifest itself. It is in moments like these that we can trace a sense of proximity, even of complicity, between Milton and some of the Fifth Monarchist prophets: even if he tends to qualify his millenarism throughout his career and frames it in realistic political terms, he shares with them an ardent hope for the transformation of all social and religious structures into a renewed and definitive form that will make effective the reign of Christ on earth.[24] It is here as well that some aspects of his thought may be seen as coinciding with that of the prophet Elizabeth Avery, whose epistolary treatise *Scripture-prophecies Opened* had been published in 1647.

Elizabeth Avery's short book (46 pages in Quarto format) is a brief collection of three letters originally written to a community of "her friends", but obviously meant for publication from the moment of their conception.[25] In a style that is alive with the dramatic imagery of the Old Testament but constantly places these images under critical and well-reasoned scrutiny, this prophetess gives a precise allegorical interpretation of the image of the destroyed statue in the book of Daniel, which leads her into a present-day identification of the fallen city of Babylon (that is, Catholicism) with the Church of England: "Here we may see the fall of Babylon. . .Babylon is fallen in many of the Saints, and fallen in the State and National Churche of Great Britain" (Avery 1647, p. 7). This hermeneutic position is put at the service of a very precise political discourse: the serious questioning of the institutional and religious structures of England as they stand in 1647. For Avery confidently states that, in due time (and in this, her position fully announces later Fifth-monarchist perspectives), all forms of magistratures and ordinances shall inevitably pass away and be "dissolved", as humanity will have no further need for them, "as when we say that the Parliament is dissolved, the men continue the same, yet it ceases to be a body politick" (Avery 1647, pp. 20–21).

Avery's personality as a theologian is steadily different from Milton's or Mary Pope's, even when tackling the very same subjects they discuss. As we have seen above, Mary Pope handles Biblical references as having firm parallelisms with the political present, establishing narrative connections that clarify the political action that must be taken. Milton's polemical intention in *The Tenure* leads him to use his many Biblical citations as working *per exemplum*, as offering self-evident guides or principles; the lessons included in them should be transparent for those who are willing to use their reason. Avery, however, approaches her Bible in a completely different manner. She concentrates firmly on what she calls the "mystical" sense of the prophetic books, opposing it to the "literal" sense (a distinction that has actually been in use since the medieval period), guiding the reader slowly but surely from the latter to the former, taking the time to formulate possible objections to her interpretations and painstakingly proceeding to refute them. Even though she claims in the opening address to the reader that she "may be counted mad to the world" and that she is ready to protect the truth of her argument "with my Blood" (Avery 1647, pp. A3–A4), her tone throughout is rather one of sober and patient elucidation, avoiding any form of histrionics and assuming the didactic tone of a confident mediator between the "mysteries" (as she calls them) of Scripture and the historical circumstance she shares with her readers.

Like Avery, Milton is interested in clarifying the connection between the legitimacy of the state and the development of a Christian society, and to do it on firmly Biblical grounds. Again and again in *The Tenure of Kings of Magistrates* he returns to the notion of covenants and institutions that have been approved by God and warranted by prophets and patriarchs throughout the history of Israel. But for him it is an equally important matter to clarify that such institutions are strictly meant to work for the correct governing of the community and that their titular authorities can (and should) be deposed whenever

they commit acts of political injustice. There is always an element of in-built provisionality in any kind of magistracy, the universality of law demands that high officers of the state should be subject to it as much as the humblest citizens. Ultimate authority comes only from God, not from human ordinances, and both Peter and Paul grant Scriptural warrant in this matter:

> There is no power but of God, saith Paul, Rom. 13, as much as if to say, God put it into man's heart to find out that way at first for common peace and preservation, approving the exercise thereof, else it contradicts Peter who calls the same authority an ordinance of Man. And it may well be obsered that both these Apostles, whenever they give this precept, express it in termes not concrete but abstract. . ., that is, they mention the ordinance, the power, the authoritie, before the persons that execute it. (Milton 1959, p. 209)

It seems logical that Milton and Avery, speaking as they do from the opposite angle to Mary Pope, should coincide in several aspects: after all, both of them agree in questioning the legitimacy of human power-holders, kings included. And yet this seeming proximity belies a deeper, unbridgeable distance between them. For while Milton sees kings and magistrates as tenured agents of a superior power, beneficiaries of a position that is granted to them in conditional form, and granted only to the extent that they may be useful to the political community, Avery sees them as fully *arbitrary powers*, completely devoid of any legitimacy, and goes so far as to include the English Parliament in these hopelessly void power structures. She goes further than this, both in intention and in language. The key terms for Avery here are "dissolution" and "passing away", for she sees all human laws and institutions as inevitably condemned to vanish, both in the minds of the believers and in the political sphere, which in itself must eventually disappear. It is not so much that political structures must be changed after a religious or ideological conversión; rather, the collective conversion will in itself cancel or disintegrate all the "ordinances" (a key Miltonic term as well) under which human beings have had to live. The idea of apocalypse is recovered by Avery in a way that carefully reframes it as metaphoric, and as announcing a deep spiritual and social transformation. We find ourselves here, then, at the beginning of a long English tradition that tends to interpret apocalyptic hope in immanent terms:

> I do conclude that these Scriptures, which we have formerly conceived to concern the dissolution of this visible heaven and earth, do onely concern the passing away of the Ordinances. . .And the earth here spoken of is the best part of man, as his natural wisdom, and humane learning, and gifts, not onely common gifts, but spiritual gifts, whereby they are enabled to speak unto edification, which may be comprehended under the same notion. (Avery 1647, p. 20).

Certainly, there is a strong conviction in the idea that the "passing away of the Ordinances" must finally come about, but this will not occur without sacrifices. On the contrary, the Saints (or those who, having listened to the prophecies, have learnt to recognize the signs of the last times) must be fully ready for the cruelty that will be inflicted on them at that time:

> Because when God is refining his people in destroying the flesh upon them, he doth make use of the wrath of men, who do fill up the measure of their sin, by their cruel usage of Saints; but sure the wrath of man shall turn to the praise of God, and the remainder of wrath will he restrain. (Avery 1647, p. 29)

Ultimately, this essential divergence brings Milton and Avery to alternative conclusions and, most importantly, to the recommendation of contrary political solutions to the crises of the late 1640s. For Milton, the solution to the crises lies in giving a determined impulse to Reformation and to the Commonwealth, which must lead to the final deposition and perhaps the execution of the tyrant (Charles I), should that final step be needed.[26] For Avery, it lies in patient persistence of religious testimony and in the experience of suffering that

must be endured by the saints before the manifestation of the kingdom of Christ, which constitutes the only hierarchical structure she is willing to recognize.

This section has tried to articulate a dialogue between the voices of three authors at the same historical juncture, the three of them writers and prophets (though in Milton's prose, the latter role is assumed metaphorically rather than literally, unlike what occurs in his poetry). Their proposed solutions to the urgency of the moment speak to us of very different authorial personalities and social environments, with differing (sometimes colliding) political and theological agendas. Underlying their differences, the key facts remain that (1) the three of them felt equally authorized to speak, equally compelled to intervene at the same moment of political crisis, reaching out to the widest possible audience, and (2) the three of them did so by basing the legitimacy and validity of their positions on the authority of the Bible rather than on secular grounds (the classical references included in *The Tenure* take a back seat to its overall reliance on Scripture)[27]. The fact that only one of these authors (Milton) went on to thrive and rise socially from 1649 onwards certainly tells us something about the gender politics of the period and about the social and political networks from which he spoke, but it does not in the least detract from the sense of a shared space of discussion between the three authors in 1647. Far from being simply an excuse or a cover for apocalyptic warnings, the assumption of a prophetic *persona* in mid-seventeenth-century England could open spaces for an articulated, cogent and politically relevant debate, both for men and for women.

5. A New Model for Female Prophecy: John Milton's *Paradise Regain'd* (1671)

John Milton's last published poetic collection, the 1671 *quarto* volume containing *Paradise Regain'd* and *Samson Agonistes*, bears all the marks of being written in a period of political retreat. Neither of the two protagonists is presented in a moment of public triumph. Both of them are shown in situations of personal and political isolation: where in one case (*Samson Agonistes*) the final success of the character occurs off-stage, vividly evoked but not directly represented, and in the other (*Paradise Regained*) it is deferred to the distant future. More pointedly, *Paradise Regain'd* deliberately avoids almost all the established tropes of the epic that Milton had explored so self-consciously in *Paradise Lost*, and notably reduces the role of the narrator, who had been so clearly identified with the author in the previous poem, thus eliminating his own assumption of a prophetic role. But if Milton seems to relinquish or relativize his own prophetic identity here, he appears now to be seriously interested in female prophecy and committed to asserting its viability and utility as a concept.

The poem acknowledges in its first Book the role of public prophecy through the persons of Simeon and Anna, a man and a woman, who preach before the temple in Jerusalem when the child Christ, apparently lost, is found there by his mother: "Just Simeon and prophetic Anna, warn'd/By vision, found thee" (i.e., Christ) "in the Temple, and spake/Before the altar and the Vested priest,/Like things of thee to all that present stood"(*PR* I: 255–58). Milton is careful to grant explicitly to both prophets an authority that allows them to speak "before the altar" (in the space of sacred celebration) and before "the vested priest" (the institutional Church authority). Both elements are relevant in the aftermath of the political battles against the established Church that the poet had fought during the 1650s and 1660s. The state prelacy can be superseded by the word of inspired individuals, and this supersession can occur on the very grounds appointed for its official activity.

But if we want to understand the strong re-positioning of female prophecy in this poem, we have to concentrate on another figure, that of the virgin Mary, the most important presence in the text apart from the main protagonists, Christ and Satan. It is through her that Milton makes his strongest statement on the role of the woman prophet, and it is highly significant that he should have done it through a character that had been strongly relativised by Protestant culture through the previous century. This is not simply another of Milton's many idiosyncrasies, but a carefully planned move, fully coherent with his

political perspective towards the end of his life. Certainly, the main prophet in the poem is none other than Christ himself. *Paradise Regain'd* is a strongly heterodox poem because of its anti-trinitarism, but it nevertheless preserves for Christ the traditional triple function of priest, king and prophet. In the solitude of the desert, and before the start of his public life, the Son assumes the three major roles that he is to play in the history of humanity.[28] But the poem also makes clear that this process has been brought about through the essential intervention of his mother, who is presented as not only having played a key role in the incarnation but also in the development of Christ's ethical and political personality. While her function as an educator and mentor of Christ has often been recognized among Milton scholars (Haskin 1988; Hillier 2011; Curbet 2012), her prophetic capacity has hitherto gone unnoticed.[29] The following paragraphs will attempt to rectify that oversight.

The importance that Milton gives to Mary certainly goes far beyond what could be expected in a seventeenth-century Protestant poem. The significance of the character in strictly doctrinal terms had certainly been relativized in the Reformation, although less than was once thought. She had retained the function of an ethical role model after the doctrinal revolution brought about by the major European reformers, and in the context of the English Revolution she had been granted a position of special dignity, as the mother of Christ and the chosen tabernacle of the Holy Spirit. But her presence in *Paradise Regain'd* reaches towards another kind of importance, while carefully avoiding any of the implications of queenship or of majesty that had been granted to her in Catholic culture. In his treatment of this figure Milton once more proved to be very much his own man, eluding both the demands of his immediate religious context and the elaborate constructions of the Papist tradition.

Mary's monologue at the beginning of Book 2, while Christ remains away in the desert, demarcates a first space of thought and action that is primarily ethical. Certainly, her sphere of activity is limited to the domestic and the everyday, seemingly isolated from any kind of open intervention in the public sphere. But that humble space is more charged with political meaning than it might first appear to be; subtly and persistingly, it is connoted as an area of protection from the powers of the monarchy. Initially, the life of the holy family was determined by the attempt to escape from the murderous designs of Herod: "To fly/. . . to Egypt, till the *murd'rous king*/Were dead, who sought his life, and missing filled/With infant blood the streets of Bethlehem" (*PR* II: 75–78, *emphasis mine*). In the fictional present of Christ's adulthood in which Mary speaks, this removal from public presence has continued, now seen as granting a safe haven away from kingly authority: "Nazareth/Hath been our dwelling many years, his life/Private, unactive, calm, contemplative,/Little *suspicious to any king*" (*PR* II: 79–81, *emphasis mine*). The monologue thus establishes, steadily if unemphatically, a highly connoted set of polar opposites: anonymity is linked to contemplation, and public exposure to the menace of monarchic power. The domestic space is an area of meditative calm, while the political arena remains open to the intrusive gaze of kings. The conclusion of the monologue confirms this contemplative seclusion:

> But I to wait with patience am inur'd:
>
> My heart hath been a storehouse long of things
>
> And sayings laid up, portending strange events. (*PR* II: 102–4)[30]

One might be perhaps tempted to deduce from this that the poem is recommending not only a discreet escape from the reach of monarchic power, but a full retreat away from politics and into a purely ethical domain. Indeed there have been several critical approaches to *Paradise Regain'd* that have identified in the text a sobered position on the part of Milton. According to these readings, the poet would have assumed here a more restrained and passive attitude than in his earlier works, looking for the affirmation of an inner, mental kingdom in which victory and redemption are not to be obtained at a high political cost, but can be achieved in the souls of those who trust in divine providence (see Fish 2001; Hillier 2011). These critical approaches, however worthy, are insufficient insofar as they

forget one of the essential aspects of the poem, its prophetic intention. After all, one of the major functions that Christ assumes in the presence of Satan during the temptation sequence is precisely that of a prophet (see Lewalski 1960, pp. 193–99). In a vibrant speech in book 4, the Son of God cancels all forms of idolatrous worship, establishing his own authority as the nexus between ancient Hebrew history and later humanity, and announcing the apocalyptic arrival of his own kingdom, that shall shatter all earthly ones once and for all:

> Know therefore when my season comes to sit
>
> On David's throne, it shall be like a tree
>
> Spreading and over-shadowing all the Earth,
>
> Or as a stone that shall to pieces dash
>
> All monarchies besides throughout the world,
>
> And of my kingdom there shall be no end. (*PR* IV: 146–51)

The strength of this prophecy is no weaker for having been spoken in the solitude of the desert to only one listener. The true kingdom shall eventually come, and its arrival will inevitably entail the destruction of all earthly or material monarchies.[31] Apocalyptic expectation, phrased in a way that would have satisfied the Fifth-monarchist revolutionaries of the previous decades, finds its way into the heart of *Paradise Regain'd*, even though it is carefully framed by the acknowledgment of a strategic need for discretion and retirement. But such an acknowledgment must be carefully distinguished from any supposed political quietism or renunciation, that the poem at no point recommends. We should not be led to identify Mary's position, as Stanley Fish has done, as a form of "non-response" to external events or as entailing merely a "gesture of renunciation" (Fish 2001, p. 330); neither should we see her primarily as a model for the acceptance of strong contrariety, "more adept at dealing with delays and disappointments" than the apostles (Haskin 1988, p. 178). Rather, the figure of Mary both exemplifies and expresses (in her appearances at the centre of Book 1, the beginning of Book 2 and in the final line of the poem) the need for a combination of discretion and political conviction that can be readily turned into action whenever the occasion arises. A decade and a half before the publication of *Paradise Regain'd*, Milton had already expressed very pointedly the need for patience in troubled times in one of his most personal lyrics, the sonnet later entitled (though not by the poet himself) *On his Blindness*:

> His state
>
> Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
>
> And speed o'er land and ocean without rest:
>
> Thy also serve who only stand and wait. (11–14)

Both Mary and Christ also have to "stand and wait" in different moments of *Paradise Regain'd*, trusting the only "kingly" authority or "state" that matters, and which will eventually destroy all purely human monarchies. Consequently, Mary's seemingly resigned decision "to wait with patience" (*PR* II: 102) cannot be seen as a defence of political renunciation, but rather as an affirmation of the need to preserve hope through patient expectation in a politically adverse environment.

Are we entitled, however, to read Mary's function in the poem as openly prophetic? As the previous parts of the present article have shown, female prophetic performance had been characterised throughout the English mid-seventeenth century by a clear willingness to intervene in the political space and also by a full sense of authoritative utterance, perceived and presented by the speaker as divinely inspired. Even though most critical work on *Paradise Regain'd* has failed to notice these elements in Mary (perhaps because of the secondary role that she willingly assumes), all of them are present in her, and all of them can be identified in the most important of her interventions: her words to the adolescent Christ, evoked retrospectively by him from his self-exile in the desert (*PR* I: 229–58). That speech

occurred when the very young Jesus was trying to discern what his mission in life would be, while he was trying to imagine a career for himself, considering possible trajectories as an educator or even as a conqueror (it is worth remembering here that Milton's Arianism, especially noticeable at this point, prevents Jesus from being all-knowing as his heavenly father is, and hence implies his being ignorant of his appointed destiny). And it is precisely at this moment that Mary intervenes, guiding him in the adequate direction and filling him with a clear sense of purpose, in a speech that determines not only the boy's personal attitude but the whole destiny of humanity:

> High are thy thoughts
>
> O Son, but nourish them and let them soar
>
> To what highth sacred vertue and true worth
>
> Can raise them, though above example high;
>
> By matchless deeds express thy matchless sire (. . .)
>
> A messenger from God fore-told thy birth
>
> Conceiv'd in me a virgin; he foretold
>
> Thou shouldst be great and sit on *David's* Throne,
>
> And of thy kingdom there should be no end. (*PR* I: 229–41)

These words are both prophecy and personal revelation for their addressee. This speech enjoins the young Christ to fulfil his potential in intellectual terms ("High are thy thoughts. . . but nourish them and let them soar"), but insisting on their being later turned to action ("matchless deeds") that may become expressive of the divine plan ("express thy matchless sire"). Meditation has to be "raised" to the height of "sacred vertue"; it is then that thought will be turned into deed. But this is no mere educational recommendation. It is the fulfilment of the divinely inspired writings and of promises made by God himself, which will ultimately lead to the arrival of the apocalypse, and to the final establishment of the divine kingdom on earth. This speech proleptically announces Christ's later one in Book IV (lines 146–51), and through the line that will be repeated in it (". . . of thy kingdom there should be no end", line 241) opens the way to all the political signification contained there. It is performative in the strictest sense of the term, since it not only announces future events, but actually causes them to occur. In this poetic re-telling of the gospels in which Christ is not aware of his future role as a redeemer, Mary brings that role into being and makes it possible through her own words.

Read in 1671, Mary's above-quoted speech could perform prophetic work on at least two levels: within the poem, as the voice that determines the future of Christ as redeemer, and outside the poem (at the level of contemporary reality), as a reminder of the certainty of the ancient promises of Scripture in politically regressive times. As the young Christ becomes (in the poem) aware of his divinely appointed mission, so would Milton's revolutionary readers (in actual reality) be reminded of their own hope in him, and of their conviction of remaining on the path towards historical fulfilment, no matter how long that path might prove to be. Taken within the poem's structure, Mary's speech in Book I (*PR* I: 229–58) must be seen in full continuity with Christ's assertion of his kingship and his annunciation of it in Book IV (*PR* IV: 146–51). The former speech not only makes the latter possible, but also strengthens it and projects itself over it. As two texts that sustain and complement each other, both of them share the same impulse and the same political intention. The kingdom that shall "dash" all other monarchies "like a stone" (as Christ puts it) is exactly the same one that Mary announces in her earlier speech, and conversely, the reign of which (as Mary puts it) there shall "be no end" is the same that Christ confirms as being incompatible with material monarchies. Both speeches share the same prophetic authority, but within their common poetic/narrative frame it is the former (the one spoken by a woman) that makes the latter possible.

It must be remembered, finally, that a space has been preserved for public female prophecy early in the poem through the figure of Anna, as I pointed out at the start of this section. Her presence confirms the fact that the model offered by Milton's version of Mary does not cancel or deny the public dimension of the female prophet; on the contrary, both models are complementary, even if Mary's private prophecy has deeper, longer-lasting effects. The need to learn to "wait in silence" in difficult times is developed equally in this poem by Mary and by Christ, but so is the capacity of giving a powerful, divinely inspired voice to apocalyptic expectation and of fully conveying its political dimensions. The rich significance of female prophecy is thus firmly asserted and renewed in Milton's *Paradise Regain'd*, both for its historical period and for later times.

6. Conclusions

Our conclusions must necessarily be provisional, because of two interconnected reasons. First, there is a vast domain of research and interrogation opening before us here, and in this article, I have only been able to offer some small hints of its possibilities. Second, and most importantly, this is a field that, because of its very nature, resists full stability or easy categorization. The works authored by Milton and by the women prophets in the mid-seventeenth century were not primarily meant to be studied or absorbed in private (or rather, in the specific case of the Miltonic epics, were not meant *only* to be thus studied): they were meant to be seen as public interventions, addressed to vast audiences and intended to have both immediate and long-term political effects. When these texts are recovered, brought into contact and understood in their common political and religious environment, their potential for debate is immediately re-opened. Their polemical intentions and theological purposes entangle in a variety of directions, and it will be the task of historians and critics to highlight and clarify their points of interaction. In any case, the potential of these bodies of work for furthering political and religious thought will be increased, not diminished, by the act of comparing and contextualizing them.

The act of prophecy is strongly and powerfully gendered in the writings of the English women prophets, and it is gendered as well in Milton's work, but in a notably different direction. There is a tendency among several (though by no means all) of these authors to represent themselves as "vessels" filled by the external force of the Spirit; they often assume an imagery of humility (the stone that has been cast out, the lowly or the humble that have no importance) in order to rhetorically invert that position and gain access to a superior authority, granted to them because of the will of God. In some occasions their experience of inspiration is expressed through (seemingly psycho-somatic) physical suffering in ways that underscore their femininity, evoking the pains of pregnancy or the specific sensibility of the female body. In this process, they rhetorically come to occupy a place of privilege in the public sphere, and they subsequently address their general audience in terms that tend to erase or neutralize the gender differences existing within it. Milton's own appropriation of prophecy is also deeply subversive of gender roles but in another direction. In his epic *Paradise Lost* it is the male prophet who, speaking from an initial position of authority, nonetheless assumes a passive position when receiving the breath of the Spirit and opens himself to being "impregnated" by its creative power. He thus experiences a creative pregnancy that, while potentially destabilising his authority, in fact, reinforces it, repeating as it does the original act through which the Spirit animated chaotic matter and gave form to it at the beginning of time. Speaking as a poet–prophet especially singled out by providence, Milton subverts the categories of gender as strongly and radically as the women prophets do, and in so doing he manages to perform an equally significant political work.

The writings and tracts of women prophets were far from involving only apocalyptic warnings or millenarian calls, or from popularising the interests of specific grassroots groups. On the contrary, a significant number of them offered articulated discussions of contemporary politics, strongly backed by a serious knowledge of Scripture, just the kind of intellectual territory where they could hold their own with Milton's coetaneous treatises. Hence, figures like Elizabeth Avery of Mary Pope can be also described as political thinkers,

touching upon some of the most pressing debates of the era, in their specific cases, the crisis concerning the role of the monarchy and the destiny of the King in 1647–49. Even if Milton and these prophets worked independently, their parallel interventions in that debate speak of a moment and an area of exchange in which all of them could voice their perspectives (although with different degrees of public authority, determined by their gender) and aim for a strong response on the part of their respective audiences, which would at times intersect; each of them was addressing the whole nation rather than their immediate social group. Prophetic discourse could thus open itself to a wide-ranging, intellectually demanding discussion in which, for a brief but richly productive period, both men and women could participate.

Milton's great epic poems allowed him to develop and refine his approach to the archetype of the female prophet, which he honed in detail and very originally in *Paradise Regain'd*. That poem carefully allows a space for public prophecy in the two figures of Simeon and Anna (one male, one female) appearing in its first book, but it skilfully reframes the function of the female prophet so as to recreate it with a more significant purpose in the person of Mary, mother of Christ. Mary is also a prophet: one whose mission is not played out in the public scene, but who prophesies in private to her son so that he may be enabled to fulfil his own triple purpose (as prophet, as priest and as king). The poem traces a movement from the initial prophetic gesture of the mother, performed in obscurity and retirement, towards the prophetic fulfilment of the Son, whose mission will bring all earthly kingdoms to an end. Here there is certainly a retreat from the public sphere and a relocation of female prophecy within the space of domesticity, which is fully coherent with the praise of anonymity developed in the poem. Such a change is the sign of a political consciousness that is more guarded and less immediately assertive than it was in Milton's prose of the 1640s and 50s. This may correspond to the poet's experience of defeat in the Restoration, and to his awareness of the strategic need for relative silence in a reactionary period; beyond his own perspective, though, it suggests a grim parallelism with the experience of many historical women prophets who, after 1660, had to leave not only their spaces of public expression but England itself, in order to keep preaching and publishing abroad.

Work on this subject, however, is just beginning. After all, it is not just a matter of putting Milton in the context of the women prophets, or *vice versa*, it is rather a matter of seeing all of them as sharing a multi-sided debate that can be re-opened in suggestive ways each time they are read not only as coetaneous, but as participating in a joint theological and political discussion. Read in the company of these women, Milton can appear to be both more and less radical than he is made out to be, as we compare some of his most polemical positions (on the tenure of magistrates, on the relationship between Church and State or on prophecy itself) with theirs. Sometimes the solutions that these women offer to specific problems may at first sight appear less final or revolutionary than his; a closer look may then reveal that their perspectives are based on views of politics and society that are as transformative and far-reaching as his, not only because of their affiliation to specific heterodox groups but also because of the individual prophetic personalities that they fashioned for themselves. In the long run, we can perhaps imagine a full re-configuration of the mid-seventeenth-century English canon in which John Milton's name appears undifferentiatedly alongside those of Katherine Sutton, Elizabeth Avery or Mary Pope, and in which the work of any of them is seen in open discussion with his. To put it in the terms used in *Areopagitica:* it was a nation of prophets, indeed.

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Notes

[1] All quotations in this article from treatises or pamphlets by seventeenth-century women included are taken from the original printings, with only one exception (Anna Trapnel's *The Cry of a Stone*, in Section 2, of which a modern scholarly edition exists). I have respected the original capitalisation and punctuation throughout.

2 To these bibliographical references must now be added an MA dissertation very recently presented by Bosik Kim at Wayne State University, "Milton and Radical Female Prophets: Millenarianism, Readership, and Poetics" (Kim 2022).

3 Christopher Hill did not fail to observe this early leniency towards radicalism in his classic study, *Milton and the English Revolution* (Hill 1979), and this attitude was confirmed and studied in more nuanced detail at various points in *Milton and Heresy*, the influential collection of essays (edited by Dobranski and Rumrich 1998).

4 Stephen Fallon, however, has pointed out the very personal bias that may also be glimpsed behind Milton's anti-prelatical position in this treatise: "Underlying Milton's brief against the bishops is righteous anger at the usurpation of *his* rights as a Christian, resentment at being treated as one who might profane the sanctuary" (Fallon 2007, p. 97).

5 Ironically, Milton's own insistence on personal conscience, and his relativising of the concept of "heresy" have not prevented him or his work from being repeatedly labelled as "heretic" for various institutional, educational or political purposes. A lucid summary and discussion of such labelling is offered by John Rumrich in his *Milton Unbound: Controversy and Interpretation*, (Rumrich 1996).

6 The most detailed account of Milton's quick progress towards open polemics on this aspect, and of his personal stake on the matter, is to be found in Barbara Lewalski's canonical biography of the poet (Lewalski 2002, pp. 154–98).

7 According to Thomas P. Corns, Milton had in fact been opening spaces for heterodox thought in his writing from 1641 onwards, sometimes explicitly and sometimes through suggestive silence on polemical issues (see Dobranski and Rumrich 1998, pp. 39–48).

8 That compulsion has been famously presented by Stanley Fish as being at the kernel of the rhetorical strategy of *Areopagitica*, in a way that deeply questions its seeming defence of pre-publication censorship; see (Fish 2001, pp. 187–214).

9 Stephen Dobranski has explored the various ways in which Milton understood authorship as a collaborative enterprise at this point in his career; see (Dobranski 1999, pp. 104–24). Working in a different (though complementary) direction, Blair Worden has identified a similar mindset in Milton's later understanding of journalism during the Crowellian period; see (Worden 2008, pp. 195–218).

10 A more detailed approach to Avery's theological and political perspectives in this treatise is offered in Section 3 of the present article.

11 For the complex location of Anna Trapnel's texts in terms of authorship, production and interaction between orality and printing, see especially (Hinds 2000, pp. xxi–xxxv; for the generic links between her production and those of other women revolutionaries, see Magro 2004).

12 When discussing basic theological matters of this kind, it is always necessary (and honest) to remember that the actual authorship of *De Doctrina Christiana* was for a long time a hotly contested affair; the dominant consensus in the twenty-first century, however, is that it was mostly written by John Milton himself, with little external collaboration or none at all. For a good summary of the debate as it stood at the turn of the century, see (Dobranski and Rumrich 1998, pp. 6–12; for more recent challenges to Milton's authorship of the treatise, see Urban 2020, pp. 156–88; Clawson and Wilson 2021, pp. 151–98; Wilson and Clawson 2022, pp. 351–400).

13 For the complex political interests backing Elizabeth Poole at the moment of publication of this treatise, see (Brod 2004; Nevitt 2012; Feroli 2006, pp. 68–71).

14 Mary Adams, considered a Ranter by London officials and having committed suicide in prison, is probably the woman prophet most distant from John Milton in terms both of her radicalism and her attention-grabbing (perhaps performative) personal attitudes; see (Mack 1992, pp. 41–42).

15 Catie Gill has proved that the spontaneity and abundance of prophetic writings by Quaker women is one result of the primacy given in their doctrine to the inner light (the relationship between the believer and the Spirit) residing within each individual, which may potentially turn every individual into a prophet. Gill is careful to observe, however, that the process of writing and publishing among the Quakers must also be framed within a powerful sense of community, and understood as having a markedly communal dimension (Gill 2017, pp. 113–47).

16 The notable degree of self-assurance and confidence attained by Quaker women prophets within their communities has long been noted by scholars in this field: see, for instance, (Hope-Bacon 1986).

17 On the leading role of Hanser Knollys in Baptist networks, and on his role as a promoter of Baptist preaching, writing and printing (including his own), see especially (Bustin 2019, pp. 61–71).

18 Fallon does not, however, explore the sexual or gender connotations of the self-representation of the poet at this point, which is part of my own concern here.

19 On the implicit parallelism between this scene in Book II and the birth of Minerva from the mind of Jupiter, see (Hart and Stevenson 1996, pp. 100–4).

20 On the relationship between Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* and Milton's representation of chaos and chaotic matter, see (Goldberg 2009, pp. 203–9), where Goldberg manages to give a quick and vivid account of some previous bibliography on the matter, with special emphasis on the work of John Rumrich and John Leonard (Rumrich 1995, 1996; Leonard 2000).

[21] The existing critical discussion and bibliography on these two treatises and their two authors is, at the present moment, still scanty. For Mary Pope, see (Smith 1994, p. 125) and especially (Font 2017, pp. 50–55); for Elizabeth Avery, see (Mack 1992, pp. 92–93, 118–19; Font 2017, pp. 44–48).

[22] In 1992 Phyllis Mack classified Mary Pope as a "puritan" (Mack 1992, p. 414), but Font has adequately pointed out her role in an Erastian community (Font 2017, p. 50); her position is better seen, in my opinion, as that of an independent thinker writing in a largely puritan environment. Phyllis Mack's classification of Elizabeth Avery as a Fifth Monarchist (Mack 1992, p. 413) is confirmed, with some nuances, by Font 2017, p. 44).

[23] Incidentally, we might observe that the latter part of this fragment involves some rewriting of Matthew 5:17; Mary Pope may thus incur in the practices of adapting Scripture to one's own ends, precisely what she accuses Catholics of doing.

[24] The occasional proximity between Milton's political positions and those of the Fifth-Monarchists has been recurringly mentioned in Milton criticism since (Hill 1979) but has not been studied in detail. The brief comparison presented here between Milton and Elizabeth Avery at the end of the 1640s may offer (to the extent that Avery may be considered an early Fifth-Monarchist) a modest starting point for a future and more detailed analysis of the matter.

[25] Most probably this environment of "friends" involved members of her family, since her father (Robert Parker) and her brother (Thomas Parker) were both dissenting clerics; it is not clear, however, to what an extent they shared her very personal theological perspectives.

[26] The possibility that Milton had inside information on the probability of regicide before Parliament actually took that decision (*The Tenure* was commissioned and written before the execution of Charles I in 1649, but published immediately after it) cannot be, of course, completely ruled out.

[27] For a classic but still essential account of how all conflicting positions tended to legitimize themselves on the Bible in this century, see (Hill 1995).

[28] These three functions of the character were first commented on in detail by Lewalski (1960).

[29] The article "Towards a Miltonic Mariology: the Word and the Body of Mary in Paradise Regain'd" (Curbet 2012) offered an attempt to read the character of Mary in Milton's short epic in theological and narrative terms, but did not discuss the matter of prophecy, which is my concern here.

[30] A brilliant interpretation of the term "storehouse", linking it conceptually with the Latin *thesaurus*, and therefore comparing Mary's bosom with a commonplace book or compilation of ancient wisdom, was suggested by Haskin (1994, pp. 136–37) and has been more recently confirmed by Urban (2018, pp. 219–20).

[31] Anticipations of the future are not, however, unanimously triumphalist in *Paradise Regain'd*. As several scholars have noted, the imagery of Christ's passion and death (the necessary and painful step before his exaltation) is also present in the poem at several points, though mostly in implicit form: see especially (Huttar 1982; Hillier 2011, pp. 178–229).

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