Carme Font. 2017. *Women's Prophetic Writings in Seventeenth-Century Britain* London and New York: Routledge

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The simple, almost formulaic title of this book, *Women's Prophetic Writings in Seventeenth-Century Britain*, screens the multifarious approaches that turn the issue into a field of research in its own right: if each of the items in the sequence—"women," "prophecy," "writing," and "seventeenth-century Britain"—is charged with its own history of scholarly speculation, in the book the trail of such critical approaches is not simply evoked, but woven structurally to untangle some of the key knots in these threads and allow the flow of a new narrative. The study, therefore, does not simply provide an overview of the latest contributions concerning British prophetesses, but, in doing so, it contributes significantly to the debate on the perceptions of female agency throughout history, the activism of sects in the political-religious landscape of the seventeenth century, or the struggle of modern religious discourses and practices to resist the drift of the mainstream secular movement. Carme Font avails herself of the supposedly peripheral ground on which some of these issues still stand to question some central tenets and bring to the fore inherited misconceptions.

The structure of the book furnishes that combined comprehensive approach whereby individual cases are presented as part of a continuum that unfolds, both chronologically and thematically, as the constant critical remarks add to its understanding. By concentrating on the heady first decades of the seventeenth century, Font sets the course of her study under no other label than *Politicum*: the biblical and classical legacy supporting the bond between women and prophetic experience could not fail to re-emerge in Reformation England, a period that also reproduced the disputes concerning the intellectual capacity of women. As the seventeenth century witnessed the spread of reading habits, along with the proliferation of diverse

religious attitudes, female writing developed amazingly and its role amidst this emerging religious environment was readjusted so as to echo a number of responses to the main political decisions and events. Font looks at the religious and social background of these women, whether they still kept contact with recusant circles, partook of the Anglican basic structure or put their faith in any of the sects that provided the communal or conventicle habitat where their messages might be heeded. She also consistently incorporates information on their family relationships, especially their links to a father, mother or husband figure, essential to their spiritual formative moments and their resistance in face of adversity. The Habermasian concept of public space is invoked by Font as she also highlights the permeable boundaries existing between the categories of the private and the public in this particular context. Certainly, both spheres coalesce once these women commit themselves to the prophetic task. Such a mission demands the arranging of their private selves so as to channel the divine voice and, thus, the thwarting of their personal dimension for a higher universal vocation. If the motif of the spiritual crisis triggered by illness, a strong emotional family loss or divine calling is almost a must in this literature, the other major ingredient in their adventure is the printing enterprise they embark on. In fact, one fascinating aspect is Font's attempt to track the contacts between prophetesses and the editorial world: they gained access to hard-to-find texts through circles of radical activists among which these booksellers and printers proved essential (Elizabeth Poole even owned the building where an unlicensed printing press belonging to Elizabeth Calvert was located), or took the opportunity to travel to the continent to have their treatises and pamphlets secretly printed (the case of Lady Eleanor Davies's journey to Amsterdam). These women were, therefore, not only the transparent empty vessels through which God's message might be conveyed. They took the trouble to comment on their writing role and pointed at the inspiration, the composition process and even the final layout of their texts. They insisted on printing, copying and preserving them and involved their close family, relatives and friends in the process. They played with the literary *persona* that would better respond to the requirements in each situation and, once introduced to the public eye as prophets, they clung to the title to construct a specific authorial self: it is this specific writing style in each of them, the animosity of some of their attacks, the opportunism in the use of some

of their metaphors, the sophisticated visionary quality beyond the basic biblical patterns, or the delirious tonality of their trances that Font so effectively describes through her hermeneutic practice.

In the first section of the book she analyses prophetic discourse as a gender-specific way for women to participate in public matters. Thus, by conducting a thorough study of their treatises, she is able to grasp the degree of independence in their utterances or else the possibility of their being handled in the political game between dissenting and official positions, as well their political repercussions. Although the prophetic stance was not in itself regarded as necessarily dangerous or radical at the time, some of these women became active creators of public opinion in daring to advise, admonish, or even condemn the religious, political and military authorities before and during the Civil Wars. Consequently, they might be initially accepted and hailed as revolutionary, only to be deemed politically incorrect or subversive later on. Such is the case of Mary Pope, who resorts to the argument of natural order and reciprocity between God, King and subjects to talk against the regicidal possibility in the tracts addressed to Parliament. Baptist Elizabeth Poole's early stance equally seemed to be in accordance with that of the Army Council, only to prove otherwise when invited to deliver a speech before Charles I's execution. Font's careful reading of their texts leads to a series of insightful questions about the doctrinal and political training of women as they so subtly offered sound political coverage through the religious fabric. Font also takes pains to reveal the hidden agenda of some male members of these non-conforming groups, in stark contrast to the sorority spirit and organizational skills of their women.

It is precisely in the conventicle meetings where such an opportunity arose for those who had a bent for prophecy. Many of the wives and daughters attending those encounters would expect to learn from one another by sharing their souls' progress through autobiographical accounts. This need to partake of an election narrative—seeking salvation and social regeneration through personal testimony—might lead to a more mystical and individually oriented sequence of prophecies, characteristic of Puritan authors like Hanna Allen, Jane Turner or Sarah Wight. This is the main theme of the second section in the book: *Protean Feminisms*. A key aspect in

some of their work is the importance granted to intellectual knowledge as different from the experience of being endowed with divine grace, as well as the ecstatic quality of this kind of prophecy and the entailing performative powers displayed accordingly. These are masterfully illustrated by Anna Trapnel's raptures, where dream and vision mingled in the sacred conversation between the woman and Christ. In clear contrast to this irrational current, the argument of this section dwells further on the didactic efforts of some of those who, confronted with the female incapacity to preach and with the hard circumstances dissenters underwent, produced an outstanding diversity of writings: poems, diaries, catechisms, prophecies, spiritual autobiographies. The chapter analyses the contribution of Elizabeth Bathurst, An Collins, Anne Venn, Elizabeth Major, Dorothy Burch, the anonymous I.K., Katherine Sutton or Katherine Chidley, all of them finding ways to preach under the guise of prophetic discourse or resorting to the recurrent theme of the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit, thus availing themselves of the closeness between preaching and announcing.

Finally, the third part, *In-Communications*, grants attention to the relationships among these women, and to the manifold implications of their writing practice. Special consideration is given to Lady Eleanor Davies and Jane Lead, whose personal and writing trajectories are exposed so as to confirm their authorial freedom. The exceptionality of the former comes not only from her enigmatic imagery and disruptive linguistic style. Of aristocratic stock and Anglican leanings, she is as unconventional in launching her prophetic tirades against Anglican archbishops as she is when defending double predestination against Calvinist tenets. If, like some of her sectarian counterparts, she reinforced her subversive agenda by invoking Prophet Daniel as her source of inspiration, Font introduces Jane Lead as one who resorted instead to the medieval mystical traditions that nourished her visionary female iconography. The popularity of her complex visions, both at home and abroad, proves the resilience of female prophecy, a discursive and cultural phenomenon all the more meaningful when registered as part of female common religious practice. Font reminds us that many women met regularly, shared their readings and religious experiences, organized political action when necessary, challenged the authority of

congregation leaders, and acquired a distinct sense of themselves as liable to participate within a larger authorial chain. Upon Jane Lead's death, for instance, Anne Bathurst, belonging to the former's original group, saw herself as Lead's successor and produced her own poetry. Davies' or Lead's exceptionality could, therefore, be absorbed into the wider general flow. Quaker women are a case in point: capable of undertaking all kinds of dangerous tasks and adapting to the new political climate in the second half of the century, they took to writing as an activity which would keep them safely anchored to their community and god, while undertaking hard prophetic activism. Katherine Evans and Sarah Cheevers, imprisoned after distributing their Quaker pamphlets among the Catholics gathered at mass in Malta, or Rebecca Travers's detention for preaching in the street, among other cases, show that prophetic practice could still be used to fulfil an evangelic mission. Furthermore, the constant commitment to godly and collective affairs would undeniably inspire these women's confidence to denounce even the inner disorder in their congregations, or else the violence at home, thus submitting the domestic sphere to the vaster prophetic powers so as to dispel its effects.

The density of Font's multifocal approach responds to the study of a thick net of primary and secondary sources which the author has carefully placed in a dialogic space. The compilation of letters, tracts, prologues, treatises, catechisms, pamphlets, poems, diaries or songs rescued from mainly the first half of the seventeenth century is entwined on almost every page with the specialized comments from a number of fields. Readers grow aware not only of the biographic ups and downs of these women and their writings, but also of the reverberation of their voices on today's feminist ears: Font is sincere when questioning our current interest in the prophetic female phenomenon, just as she is lucid in pointing out how this tradition may have dwindled away at the time. Most of all, through a careful and sensible procedure, she moves pertinently to demonstrate the diversity and theoretical complexity implied in women's uses of prophecy: the gift, sealed by printing, was widely enjoyed by a significant number of women of all persuasions and conditions, who managed to project their voices and fully inscribe themselves upon

the daily reality of the seventeenth century. Font's tour de force offers one of the most consistent and compelling depictions of this process.

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