Negotiating the Public and the Private: Rhetoric and Women's Poetry in Interregnum England

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Recent research has contributed substantially to our understanding of early modern women's role in the history of rhetoric.[1] Much of this research has focused on the mid-seventeenth century, a time when women's voices were to a degree liberated by the events of the English Revolution. The social, political, and religious upheaval of the 1650s may have in some ways empowered them, but women writers nevertheless remained less than enthusiastic about participating in public discourse, their reticence often expressed in a rejection of all things rhetorical.[2] Despite their frequent claims to the contrary, however, their writing proves remarkably intent on shaping a particular public ethos, one dependent on the simultaneous assertion of an unknown and unknowable private self.[3] Though successfully negotiating public and private was a challenge shared by many of their literary predecessors, the task of shaping a deliberate and effective ethos may have been more problematic for women writers in the 1650s, a decade that granted women greater freedom to speak publicly even as the ideology of separate spheres that would ultimately curtail them took on a more discernible shape.[4]

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[1] The work of rhetoricians like Andrea Lunsford, Molly Meijer Wertheim, Christine Mason Sutherland, and Jane Dunawerth has recently included women's prose in rhetorical history. In women's verse, notable early modern examples include the Elizabethan and Stuart poets Mary Sidney Herbert, Lady Mary Wroth, and Aemilia Lanyer, whose work is deeply rhetorical (See Lyn Bennett, *Women Writing of Divinest Things: Rhetoric and the Poetry of Pembroke, Wroth, and Lanyer*).

[2] "[I]n the very act of drawing upon her ethos in order to engage in public discourse," writes Mason Sutherland, "the woman destroyed it. Such was the paradoxical situation in which the seventeenth-century woman writer found herself" (*Mary Astell* 3).

[3] A contradictory rhetoric of public and private has been long associated with a number of early modern poets well known for some decidedly rhetorical self-fashioning of their own. John Donne may be the most famous of these, but many early modern writers, from Sir Thomas Wyatt to Sir Philip Sidney to Andrew Marvell, are recognized for their fashioning of public and private selves.

[4] It was important to women that, as Charlotte Sussman describes it, "there was a shift in the meaning of privacy from the privacy of one's mind to a meaning that included the household, the domestic space Habermas calls the 'intimate sphere'" (149).

Three mid-century writers in particular illustrate the complexity, difficulty, and self-denial inherent in effecting a voice acceptable not only to their mid-century audience but also to themselves: the pseudonymous "Eliza," the named but unknown An Collins, and the prophet Anna Trapnel. The three also share a temporal coincidence and generic kinship in that their publications appeared in relatively rapid succession and all three are largely devotional works rendered in a combination of verse and prose. *Eliza's Babes, or the Virgins-Offering* was published in 1652, Collins's *Divine Songs and Meditacions* in 1653, and Trapnel's *The Cry of a Stone* in the early months of 1654. Eliza's volume is made up of over a hundred of the author's "babes," mostly poems of a devotional nature, as well as a prose preface "To the Reader" and nearly three dozen prose meditations. Though largely a series of devotional poems, Collins's volume, which she similarly calls "the offspring of my mind" ("The Preface" 79), begins with a short prose preface "To the Reader" and concludes with five verse "meditacions" appearing (like Eliza's) at the end of the volume. Finally, Trapnel's *The Cry of a Stone* records its author's biographical narrative and prophetic visions in prose, the latter also rendered in a series of twelve songs and hymns interspersed throughout. Rather than offering separate meditations, however, the volume itself represents the sort of meditation Erica Longfellow describes as "spontaneous thoughts on a religious subject" (*Women and Religious Writing* 131) that, I would add, is also a mark of much of the verse of both Eliza and Collins. Taken together, their work offers more than a passing glimpse into what may be an important moment in women's literary and rhetorical history, one characterized by a feminine ethos that is at once self-effacing and self-asserting. All three women, in fact, seem intentionally to obscure their voices in the process of fashioning an acceptable ethos in the midst of unprecedented liberation and repression.[5]

[5] The example of Eliza, Collins, and Trapnel may even suggest that such contradictory tendencies may be more self-negating than anything, explaining in part these writers' longstanding obscurity. Predictably, these women share a

Our limited knowledge of the women behind the works is also the result of historical circumstance. There are only two extant copies of *Eliza's Babes* and only one of Collins's *Divine Songs*, a scarcity that means we do not know who read the books or how wide a circulation they enjoyed.[6] We also know little about the pseudonymous Eliza or of the virtually anonymous Collins. Though the volumes appear to reveal something of their authors, mostly having to do with relationships in Eliza's case and illness in Collins's,[7] their ethos is clearly of the intrinsic kind, what Christine Mason Sutherland defines as that achieved almost exclusively through the text (*Mary Astell* 4).[8] What we discover, then, is limited to what these women want us to know through works dominated by a fervent avowal of faith and commitment to Christ. Mining either for personal nuggets is not a profitless enterprise, but the yield is limited; we can learn only as much as the self-censoring and unidentified authors choose to reveal.

We do, however, know somewhat more about Trapnel, who may seem a strange bedfellow to Eliza and Collins. She tells us that she was "the daughter of William Trapnel,

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marginal status as writers: none is strictly canonical, although recent assessments of their poetry vary. Eliza's is gaining recognition in some quarters, but it has also been recently described as neither intriguingly "radical" nor "of high literary quality" (Longfellow 243); Collins's volume may not be held in wide regard either, but her collection of "experimental verse forms" is thought by at least one reader to represent "a remarkable collection of poetry" (Hobby 30); literary-critical responses to Trapnel are also mixed – though one recent reader describes her as "an intriguing, sophisticated lyricist" (Hammons 56), another proposes that her "execrable impromptu verses" may be most interesting for a lack of quality that may have given her extemporaneous outpourings a "guarantee of authenticity" (Davies 166) but has not done much for her literary reputation. That the work of all three women until relatively recently has not attracted much attention from literary critics says much about its perceived quality and interest.

[6] See L. E. Semler, "A Note on the Text" in his critical edition of *Eliza's Babes* (Cranbury NJ and London: Associated University Presses, 2001), 43-45. In "Who is the Mother of *Eliza's Babes*," Semler also argues that she was Elizabeth Emerson, wife of George Wither, well-known emblemist and "Parliamentarian soldier and prophet-poet" (519), but the general consensus is that her identity remains unverifiable.

[7] We learn, for instance, that Eliza disliked the idea of marriage but eventually made a happy match; she spent time in the country as well as the city; she had a brother but no biological children; she held Puritan views, but may have known or even visited Elizabeth of Bohemia, the daughter of Charles I, who had wed the Elector Palantine in 1613. From Collins, we discover that she was sickly for lengthy periods of time; she had once indulged a weakness for "pleasant histories" ("The Discourse" 112); she was engaged with contemporary political events; and, above all, she was saved by grace and counted herself among the Saints. But, as Collins's recent editor notes, we "know nothing about her apart from what we can glean from her one existing book" (Gottlieb vii).

[8] Mason Sutherland goes on to explain that intrinsic ethos offered, through virtual anonymity, a means of self-fashioning that could work to a woman writer's advantage by not allowing an established reputation to influence reader reception.

Shipwright, who lived in Poplar, in Stepney Parish" (3) and offers us biographical accounts of her conversion and religious activism. Trapnel became famous at the close of the 1640s for her twelve-day prophetic trance at Whitehall, where she attended the sedition trial of the religious radical Vavasour Powell.[9] In this case, biographical detail is misleading, given that *The Cry of a Stone* was not penned by the prophet, but is a secondhand record of what Trapnel apparently spoke during her trance. Because her self-styled "Relator" wrote down only as much of her oral and extempore compositions as he could capture, given both his "very slow and unready hand" (sig. a2v) and a frequent "press of people in the Chamber" (19), we cannot know how closely the text corresponds with Trapnel's speech. To complicate matters, *The Cry of a Stone* is also the product of multiple authorial voices. Trapnel not only claims to speak for God and not herself, her amanuensis also regularly intervenes, contextualizing and interpreting the prophet's words and voicing his own opinions.[10] As much as we may know about the historical Trapnel, her ethos is intrinsically managed by another in a work that may reveal even less about its author than *Eliza's Babes* or the *Divine Songs*.

The pseudonymous "Eliza," the private Collins, and the mediated prophet Trapnel all sought anonymity, a goal that may not have been so pressing for earlier women writers. It may very well be, as Maria Magro claims (409), that the complex interweaving of "the personal and the social, private and public" is a defining feature of spiritual autobiography. But something more than generic similarity is at work in the three collections. While earlier writers seem less intent on maintaining a private self while performing a public act, the negotiation of

[9] This was only one of Trapnel's trances. Apparently, she was also in a trance "for ten months from October 1657 to August 1658 when she was sustained only by drinking small beer and eating toast" (Crawford 107). According to Kate Chedgzoy, "in the years from 1649 to 1688, more than half the texts published by women were prophecies" (238).

[10] As Sue Wiseman notes, the book's layered voices force us to ask who actually is the author and "Is the subject-position that of the narrator (Trapnel?) as mediated through the words of the relator, or is it God who is speaking, or an entangled mixture of the two?" (188).

contradictory and conflicting selves takes center stage in the work of their mid-century counterparts. That is, these mid-century writers seem to be much more engaged in negotiating the public and private, an emerging binary of categories that were once more fluid or even non-existent. The uncomfortable and often contradictory tension that results may, however, have worked to these writers' rhetorical advantage. The prominence of a private, unknowable self within and beyond their texts, together with the material conditions of their dissemination, allowed these women not only to assume public voices but also, in Trapnel's case at least, to be taken seriously.

The author of *Eliza's Babes*, as her decision to remain anonymous indicates, seems adamant about remaining out of the public eye. She suggests as much in her poem "To a Friend at Court":

> Retired here content I live,
> My own thoughts to me pleasure give.
> While thine owne actions anger thee,
> Sweet quiet thought contenteth me.
> This blessing sweet retirednesse brings,
> We envy none, but pity Kings. (1-6)

In "My pleasing Life," this same poet relishes her freedom from "earths tumults" (5), and praises the "Sweet quiet, sweet obscurity" that "best pleaseth" (1-2).[11] As Elaine Hobby claims, Eliza may be exploring "the specifically female advantages of abandoning the world" (*Virtue of Necessity* 55). If so, she also fashions an appropriately subdued and feminine voice by using the adjectival "sweet" to modify the nouns "thought," "retirednesse," and "quiet." Yet the speaker's introverted, "sweet, quiet" tone evidently belies a more public agenda. Though Eliza's political sympathies and her doctrinal orientation remain uncertain, she also speaks as a Royalist, as her pity for kings indicates. She may also have been a Royalist with Puritan sympathies—a seeming

[11] Longfellow argues that both "Eliza's religious affiliation" and "political sympathies" are "deliberately obscure," and notes that some critics have argued that Eliza was a Royalist (Hobby) while others see her as a Puritan Parliamentarian (Semler) (Longfellow245).

contradiction but not out of the realm of possibility, given the fluid nature of mid-century political and religious thought. If this is the case, Eliza may be counted among "many of the defeated royalists" who, as Hobby proposes, "had to find some way of making failure and withdrawal from the world palatable" (55).

Yet Eliza seems far from abandoning the world all together. In another poem, she belies her professed wish for obscurity by writing "To the King." Since this piece is clearly and deliberately dated 1644, the king she addresses can only be Charles I. Here, Eliza makes an overt anti-war plea using the rhetorical figure *dehortatio*: "Be not too rigid," she instructs her monarch, "dear King yeeld" (10).[12] Eliza's political petitions, however, do not stop here. In a later poem, "To Generall Cromwell," that is presented "in a strikingly large font size" (Semler 162), the speaker offers to "kiss the Rod" of God's self-proclaimed scourge and urges the future Protector once again to take it up.[13] Now that "Kings and Princes scourged be," Eliza again exhorts, "Whip thou the Lawyer from his fee / That is so great" (9-10) . . . "If then from Tyrants you'l [*sic*] us free" . . . "Free us from their Laws Tyranny" (17-18). The poet is bold enough to issue an imperative to the iron-fisted General Cromwell and to end with a threatening appeal to pathos: the poem concludes, "If not! wee'l say the head is pale, / But still the sting lives in the tail" (19-20).

In *Divine Songs and Meditacions* (a volume whose very title points to its interweaving of public and private genres[14]), the private woman also coexists with the public writer in creating a

[12] Semler notes that the petition of Eliza's poem resembles the propositions by Parliament to Charles I made in 1643 and also "reflects the desires of the *Solemn League and Covenant* ratified in September of the same year" ("Who is the Mother" 526).
[13] Perhaps alluding to Psalm 2, Eliza gives title to the well-known anthology, *Kissing the Rod*, the Germaine Greer *et al*. edited collection that did much to draw our attention to the early modern woman poet.
[14] Helen Wilcox has shown that autobiographical writing (which Collins's "The Discourse" to a large extent is) stubbornly resists our attempts to come up with an "easy classification of the public or the private in Renaissance women's lives" ("Private Writing" 60). Elsewhere, she laments "those too-familiar binaries of public and private, political and spiritual, masculine and feminine" ("Women's Devotional Poetry" 466).

persona that enables her political agenda in a number of ways.[15] Collins's book is, however, more explicitly public in its aim than Eliza's. It includes political poems like "A Song composed in time of the Civill Warr, when the wicked did much insult over the godly" (63-66), a seventy-seven line poem on the Reformation, "Another Song, Time past we understood by story" (63-65), as well as "This Song sheweth that God is the strength of his People" (51-54). In works such as these, Collins's recent editor finds "much evidence of her boldness and engagement in public issues" as opposed to the passiveness and retreat often attributed to her work (Gottlieb x). Collins herself also declares a for herself a distinctly public audience: her collection is "set forth," she writes, "for the benefit, and comfort of others," especially "those Christians who are of disconsolate Spirits" ("To the Reader" 1).[16]

Although Collins's "boldness and engagement in public issues" is clear, she is also clearly interested in privacy. Early in "The Discourse," the longest and most important poem in the volume,[17] the poet writes

> Vnto the publick view of every one
> I did not purpose these my lines to send,
> hich for my private use were made alone. (15-17)

Although *Divine Songs and Meditacions* publicly explores political issues, its author seems to have been a very private woman. Her work indicates that she was confined to the house for

[15] Barbara Lewalski says that "Religious lyric, though often didactic in intention or effect, is a private mode, concerned to discover and express the various and vacillating spiritual conditions and emotions the soul experiences in meditation, prayer, and praise" (4), a description that well suits Collins's longest poem, "The Discourse," as well as her series of five poetic meditations. Other poems in Collins's collection are explicitly political and therefore represent a more public mode.

[16] See Gottlieb, "An Collins and the Experience of Defeat" for an extensive political reading of the poem.

[17] While rightly warning us that "it would be wrong to look for any overarching 'women's experience' or 'female voice'" in this or any historical period, Hobby identifies "a keen recognition that women in the period were expected to be too modest to vaunt themselves in print" ("Women's Published Writings" 17) as a tendency common among women writers of the day. In her discussion of the poem, Bronwen Price refers to similar gestures made by Aemilia Lanyer some four decades earlier, and notes that "by the 1650s the humility topos was such a feature of women's writing across the religious and political spectrum that it may also be regarded as a feminized convention." Yet, as Price also points out, such claims may be more strategic than anything and often have "a notably ambivalent edge," shown in Collins's case by her confident declaration of her right and intention to publish (283).

lengthy periods, and she may have been chronically ill. Though, as Gottlieb points out, devotional authors often write about or through illness, affliction and incapacity "were more than devotional or expressive devices" ("Experience of Defeat" 218). Collins's linking of "both physical and spiritual pain" throughout her volume is neither pathetic nor superficial but, according to Gottlieb, represents "a multileveled dramatic argument that is emotionally charged, brave, and broadly applicable" (219). As Gottlieb claims, illness may not function primarily as an appeal to pathos. Instead, physical affliction provides the foundation on which Collins builds her speaker's public voice. Physically separated from society and a less worldly figure than Trapnel or even Eliza, Collins negotiates a space for her public, political voice by using physical withdrawal to deny ambition and justify the anonymity necessary to fashioning an acceptable public self.

Although explicitly political, Trapnel's volume is less ambiguous about its status as a public work. Indeed, its political purpose is made clear from the very first of its songs, "When Babylon within" (19-21),

> the great and tall,
> With tumults shall come down:
> Then that which is without shall fall,
> And be laid flat on ground. (1-4)

Here, Trapnel chooses a word Eliza also employs in "My pleasing Life." Given the nature of English life at the time they wrote, both women likely use *tumults* to mean the "commotion of a multitude, usually with confused speech or uproar; public disturbance," or "disorderly or riotous proceeding" (*OED*). They may even be using *tumult* in its rarer sense of "disorderly crowd" or "mob," cited by the *OED* in works dated 1628 and 1648, the latter from the Royalist treatise *Eikon Basilike* that was published in the wake of Charles I's execution. Implying that Cromwell might face an end similar to the late king's, Trapnel makes her political statement with the figure

cataplexis, more dire than Eliza's comparatively mild threat of a weakened reputation. In "Write how that Protectors shall go," Trapnel commands,

> And into graves there lye:
> Let pens make known what is said, that,
> They shall expire and die.
>
> Oh write also that Colonels
> And Captains they shall down,
> Be not affraid to pen also,
> That Christ will them cast down.
>
> Because they have not honored God,
> They have not paid their Vows:
> But only blustring Oaks have been,
> Great tall branches and boughs. (41-52)

Given that her identity is not obscured, Trapnel seems even bolder than both Eliza and the named but unknown Collins in making a public, pathetic appeal focused on a political issue. Imperatives like "Let pens make known" and "Be not affraid to pen," attest to Trapnel's aim to create an authoritative ethos by taking charge of her own text, as she does throughout the poem by repeatedly ordering her scribe to "write" (25, 29, 33, and 37).

Yet the insistently political aim of Trapnel's voice does not make it unequivocally public. In fact, withdrawal due to physical illness is crucial to enabling her political message. As Katharine Gillespie writes, "The 'publicness' of Trapnel's 'private' performances resulted from the fact that she drew a crowd" (95). Yet there is more to the story than the rather bizarre melding of public and private that comes from staging a "political protest" (92), as David Loewenstein calls it, in one's bedchamber. No matter how forthright she may seem, Trapnel's publicly presented self and her authorship are equally mediated by both the divinely inspired (or, as she claimed, divinely dictated) origin of her speech and by the pen of her Relator. Not only does Trapnel deflect authorial responsibility by claiming only secondhand composition, the words that appear in public appear to be determined by another. We soon learn that the Relator heard her deliver "many things" but, despite the poet's imperious commands to "write," only

some “of publique nature were taken” (21). Trapnel’s scribe is thus also her editor, making the final decisions about what is of a suitably “publique nature” and therefore deserving of permanent record. In shaping an appropriate voice on her behalf, the Relator absolves her of public responsibility and ensures that Trapnel’s ethos remains private or at least guardedly public.

In an early modern version of the telephone game, though, it seems that Trapnel’s voice became corrupted in the telling; earlier versions of her speeches, the Relator tells us, “do not appear to men as they came from her, but as deformed and disguised with the pervertings and depravings of the Reporters.” The solution to this problem, we are told, is “to present to publick view a true and faithful Relation . . . whereby a fair opportunity is laid before offended and unsatisfied spirits to examine, try and judge, and happily to correct their Censures” (sig. a2v). Trapnel’s scribe seems more of a savvy PR person than a scrupulous secretary, fashioning an acceptable ethos for a client who may not always speak for the good of the cause. Whether she is too outspoken or not forthcoming enough we cannot know without access to what the Relator has chosen not to relate at the same time as he gives readers “some taste . . . of the things that were spoken” (2). Despite her comparatively more public voice, Trapnel shares with Eliza and Collins an ethos whose effectiveness depends on situating herself, in this case, within the more usually private space of the bedchamber.

Women writers of this decade seem to believe that persuasion comes with obscurity, whether hiding behind the metaphorical curtain woven by Trapnel’s Relator, preferring the quiet retreat of Eliza’s obscurity, or adopting Collins’s stance as an “Auther . . . unknown” (“The Discourse” 52). That feminine persuasion depended to some extent on withdrawal is evident also in Eliza's prefatory remarks, which begin with an expressed reluctance to send her *Babes* “into

the world," even though she soon implies an obligation to give her Savior "publique thankes, for such infinite and publque [*sic*] favours" ("To the Reader" 57-58). Eliza's public voice thus likewise relies on the simultaneous presentation of a private self that may, like Collins's, turn out to be "not so facile, as some suppose" ("The Discourse" 247). Intent on fashioning an ethos that is at once private and public, these women simultaneously articulate a clearer sense of that distinction than their counterparts earlier in the century. Ultimately, the uneasy negotiation of public and private visible in the work of all three suggests a moment in women's rhetorical history that may have been even more integrally bound up with the social, cultural, and political climate than has been conventionally assumed..

The devotional verse of Eliza, Collins, and Trapnel also attests to religion's increasing alignment with the growing division between public and private. As we have seen, all three poets seem to recognize the necessity of such a division but cannot clearly maintain it. What sometimes appears to be an unworkable confusion of public and private may, however, be essential to the religious poet's legitimate expression in a milieu in which religion, as Helen Wilcox notes, stood "centrally on the agenda of national and personal life" ("Language of Devotion" 75).[18] That their verse is religious granted women writers the authorial freedom to engage agendas national and personal, or public and private, in a broad context; that those separate agendas arose from the single cause of religion also necessitated the simultaneous union and distinction of what would only later become discernibly separate categories.[19] The

[18] One of Trapnel's recent readers, in fact, argues that the prophet "can be counted among the 'originators' of a liberal theory that erects a boundary between the public realm of government and a private sphere of guaranteed protection (or 'rights') against interference by authorities" (Gillespie 65).

[19] Collins's readers suggest that her gender as much as her religion may have allowed her to encompass both private and public while maintaining a reasonably solid footing in each. W. Scott Howard, for example, argues that Collins managed to participate in a public forum "culturally constructed as a male domain" without utterly abandoning the private realm of the female (184). Like a number of her male contemporaries as well, Collins follows the poetic path laid down by George Herbert in extolling "the merit of classic Augustinian 'ejacculacions'" – those "fervent

persuasiveness of Eliza, Collins, and Trapnel alike therefore depended in part on their willingness to engage the public and private in a way that is as contradictory as it is necessary. In a self-consciously rhetorical age, any verbal negotiation of the two is accompanied by the writer's simultaneous deployment and denial of the art of persuasion; accordingly, the work of Eliza, Collins, and Trapnel is as rhetorical as it is public and as anti-rhetorical as it is private.

In *Eliza's Babes*, the author's preoccupation with public and private is best illustrated in the intensely voyeuristic "To a Friend for her Naked Breasts" (56):

> Madam I praise you, 'cause you'r free,
> And you doe not conceal from me
> What hidden in your heart doth lye?
> If I can it through your breasts spy.
>
> Some Ladies will not show their breasts,
> For feare men think they are undrest,
> Or by't their hearts they should discover,
> They do't to tempt some wanton Lover.
>
> They are afraid tempters to be,
> Because a Curse impos'd they see,
> Upon the tempter that was first,
> By an all-seeing God that's just.
>
> But though I praise you have a care
> Of that al-seeing eye, and feare,
> Lest he through your bare brests see sin,
> And punish you for what's within.

Acknowledging the tension generated by a poem concerned in its "every nuance with the dialectic between hiding and showing, concealing and exposing, covering up and undressing," Ronald Huebert points to a central preoccupation of *Eliza's Babes* (55). Though the poem opens with a *characterismus* unconventional in its conflation of body and mind, the two are closely associated throughout Eliza's corpus. At times, the poet describes an ideal devotional self dressed in "faire eternall robes of light" ("The Swans" 4) that "shall hide my shame" ("My Robes" 4), while elsewhere suggesting that her earthly, sinful self requires display since she cannot reach

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supplications" whose masculine connotations need no explanation. Like a number of her female contemporaries, however, she also "calls her poems her 'offspring'" (Clarke 215).

the realm of angels, as she notes in the poem titled "Luke 20.36," while "still wrapt in robes of earth" (6).[20] Metaphors of concealment and exposure embody the difficulties of a writer grappling with the growing distinction between private and public, whose inevitable interconnection is also inherently rhetorical. Eliza seems to know that successful persuasion depends on knowing what to hide and what to show, and she may also be aware that the simultaneous and contradictory demands of private concealment and public exposure inform every rhetorical act.[21]

Eliza nevertheless assumes a vehemently anti-rhetorical stance. In the poem "My intention" (19), for example, she orders "vain invention" hence and addresses rhetoric with the directive, "Court not my Muse with fine invention" (1, 3). Though long thought to be the rhetor's and the poet's most valuable tool, invention seems wholly unsuited to Eliza's project: "To praise my God," she maintains, "tis my intention" (4). Yet, as much as she rejects rhetoric and strives to transcend poetic tradition in spurning "such fools" who "goe for aid unto the Muses Nine" ("Of Poetry" 22-23, 6-7), she deploys literary conventions that hearken back to the previous century and beyond. Voiced within a collection of verse that draws heavily on the Petrarchan imagery of

[20] Trapnel also uses the metaphor of divine grace as clothing, especially in her third song (30-33). "Oh Merchants," the poem begins,

> . . .cloath your selves with robes,
> Which will never be wore
> Not that which will to raggs be turn'd,
> Nor that which can be tore.
>
> But here is Cloathing substantial,
> Oh it is costly too!
> Oh it is white! Oh it is that
> Which Christs blood bought to you! (41–48)

In her fifth song ("Oh, it is that light that burneth bright" 39-41), she likewise refers to Christ's garments:

> O King Jesus, King Jesus, thou
> in apparrel art rich,
> A Diadem about thy neck,
> and forth it thou dost reach. (69-72)

[21] In this at least, Eliza shares what Greenblatt identifies as Wyatt's "competing modes of self-presentation," visible in the poet's aim both to manipulate appearances and to reveal "that which is hidden within" (156).

her predecessors, her protests prove no more convincing than the disclaimers of earlier poets like Philip Sidney. As much as Sidney's insistence that he writes from the heart is everywhere belied by his mastery of poetic conventions and supreme rhetorical skill, so Eliza's disclaimers are less than entirely convincing. In a poetic tradition as deeply rhetorical as the one in which Eliza writes, she cannot escape the influence of rhetoric no matter how much she insists that her poetry is private and the rhetor's tools are therefore not hers.

In fact, the opening poem of *Eliza's Babes*, a short paraphrase of the tenth verse of Psalm 56, sets up a dialectic of public and private that proves to be the volume's primary preoccupation:

> I Glory in the word of God,
> To praise it I accord.
> With joy I will declare abroad,
> The goodness of the Lord.
>
> All you that goodness doe disdaine,
> Goe; read not here:
> And if you doe; I tell you plaine,
> I doe not care.
> For why? Above your reach my soule is plac'st,
> And your odd words shall not my minde distaste. (1-10)

This speaker is entirely comfortable insisting that she will make a public statement, "I will declare abroad," from a position "above your reach" that is both transcendent and represents a state of private interiority. Eliza is thus able to venture into the public realm by situating herself firmly in the private, her persuasive force arising from her individual, private praise of "the word of God" and not public "odd words." Rhetorically, Eliza uses the public voice to champion what is more modest, feminine, and private.

Like Eliza, Collins advocates personal introspection as the way to devotional understanding and utterance. In "The Discourse"[22] Collins writes "Next unto God, my self I

[22] Though the brand of Protestantism to which she subscribed remains unclear, Collins's theology seems far removed from the tenets of Elizabethan Anglicanism. Her modern editor points to indications that "she is, among

sought to know" (246) and vows to "establish inward peace, / How-ever outward crosses do increase" (146-47). Collins thus makes explicit her belief in the primacy of private life. In expressing her own reluctance to act publicly and her similar rejection of what Eliza dubs "odd words," she appears also to reject all things rhetorical.[23] In her lyric "Another Song [The Winter of my infancy]," Collins adamantly denies the public and the rhetorical: "blis devine," she writes, "Neither Logician nor Rhetorician / Can well define" (58-60). According to Collins, a truly devotional state eludes rhetorical artfulness or manipulation, even with the help of rhetoric's less suspect companion, logic.[24] Earlier in the poem, the speaker expresses the same point more subtly: "Apt to produce a fruit most rare," poetic and devotional inspiration come when "as a garden is my mind enclosed fast" (26-28).[25] That the rhetorical aim of persuasion is secondary to Collins's desire to represent a private interiority seems indisputable in this poem and elsewhere, where she turns away from "Looking to outward things" and toward "Internall Peace and Consolacion" ("Another Song, Having restrained Discontent" 7, 12).

In a separate poem, also titled "Another Song" ("Time past we understood by story" 63-65), Collins's rejection of rhetoric is even more pointed as she accuses the Reformation's resistors of "Sophistry and Tiranny" (20) for their attempts to "prove by Elocution / And Hellish logic" (22-23). Articulating a suspicion heightened by the Reformation, Collins seems well

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other things, non-predestinarian, occasionally puritanical . . . congregational as well as attuned to what she describes as a personal inner light, apocalyptic, and committed to continuing and reforming the Reformation" (Gottlieb, "Introduction" xvii).

[23] This is also true for her work as a whole. For example, the *Divine Songs and Meditacions*, begins with a public address "To the Reader," and its penultimate entry consists of a series of five poetic meditations—tellingly, the two sections are separated by a number of other poems, including "The Discourse." As much as she recognizes their interdependence, Collins seems just as intent on keeping her public and private voices separate.

[24] In opposing meditation to the classical disciplines, Collins lumps logic and rhetoric together. By doing so, she disregards the fact that the differences between the two had been a topic of debate since Plato and Aristotle.

[25] In her *Report and Plea*, Trapnel also "develops the image of the garden as a place of liberating self-enclosure, in which she can escape from human intercourse for personal conversation with God" (Longfellow, *Women and Religious Writing* 168)

aware of the growing belief that elaborate style is excessive (and therefore specious) ornament.[26] Accordingly, her verse is not adorned with the countless rhetorical figures deployed by poets a generation or two earlier: rhetoric's "colours," she writes elsewhere, only "glose" and "In time they shall their luster lose" ("Civill War" 21-24). For Collins, "The grounds of true Religion" go "far beyond, / All civill policy or humane Art," but these

> . . . sacred principles I got by heart
> Which much enabled me to apprehend
> The sence of that whereto I shall attend. ("The Discourse" 205-10)

There is no art external to herself that can help to uncover religious truth; rather, it is only revealed internally and intuitively, "by heart" and not by discourse.

At the same time, Collins's volume makes it clear that she aims for "the conversion and sanctification of particular human beings" Mason Sutherland describes as the sort of non-rhetorical persuasion particular to Christian rhetoric ("Augustine, Ethos and the Integrative Nature of Christian Rhetoric" 9). Avoiding the apparent use of rhetoric, Collins actually demonstrates her understanding of its classical and early modern conventions;[27] rejecting such conventions is key to the poet's persuasive aim, but rhetoric remains crucial to her project. The plain style Collins appears to prefer was, in fact, by her day considered especially persuasive (as opposed to seductive, ornate rhetoric) in its implication of an author who does not aim to conceal

[26] This is not, however, always the case; style could also perform a devotional function. Using the example of amplification, a stylistic characteristic achieved through "tropes and figures, commonplaces, dialectical proofs, and rhetorical *colores*," Shuger observes that "The distinction between amplification as deception and Christian amplification, which displays the real magnitude of inward and spiritual goods, appears throughout Renaissance rhetoric" (*Sacred Rhetoric* 224-25). Though Shuger refers to beliefs that came "to fruition between 1560 and 1620" and are associated with the "Christian grand style," she also notes that "the passionate plain style" (which Collins's verse arguably exemplifies) "was actually only a variant of the grand style and often amounted to the same thing in practice" (*Sacred Rhetoric* 244-47).

[27] That familiarity can be clearly demonstrated in the first fifty-six lines of "The Discourse" alone. Functioning as its exordium, the poet manages in the poem's opening section to assert her persuasive (and thus rhetorical) intent, highlight the importance of three of rhetoric's five parts: style (hers is decidedly and deliberately plain), arrangement (or what the poet calls a desire "to proceed Methodicall" [line 99]), and invention (which includes the poet's sensitive understanding of rhetoric's "artificial" proofs of ethos, pathos, and *logos*). The exordium also confirms the poem's engagement with rhetoric's three traditional branches, the epideictic, judicial, and deliberative.

or beguile. For this reason, rhetorical theory (both classical and Christian) had always acknowledged the value of the low (or plain) style for particular occasions. The sincerity and simple piety imparted by Collins's plain style is thus fitting for the devotional occasion of her volume. In its very simplicity, style in the *Divine Songs* embodies the plain truth the volume aims to describe; at the same time, it also depends on the very public art the volume's author professes to reject.

Trapnel makes similar gestures of denial. We learn in the Relator's preamble to Trapnel's sixth song that she had already "made mention of the University-learning and the National Clergy (as they are called)" and then "proceeded unto singing" (42-43). The poem is apparently missing its opening seven or eight verses, but what we do have begins with further reference to formal education. "For human Arts and Sciences" begins,

> because you doat on them,
> Therfore the Lord wil others teach
> whom you count but Lay-men.
>
> For you have set too high a price
> upon your Learning here,
> Oh that makes Christ for to come out
> and from you it to tear. (1-8)

Apparently, God does not favour those who have received "so much fleece from Christs flock" (10) but honours "Christs Scholars" who are "perfected with learning from above" (13). Trapnel may profess that formal education is not the most valuable kind of learning, but she would also like to claim some of the authority that goes with it. Early in *The Cry of a Stone,* Trapnel herself makes a point of noting that she "was trained up to my book and writing" (3); in a number of ways throughout her volume, her work confirms what Hammons describes as an easy familiarity with "contemporary religious lyrics" (84). Trapnel's more than intuitive understanding of how to use language becomes clearer in the volume's second song (25-29), where she asserts the

importance of style to personal salvation. “Oh when Christ speaks to you,” she advises her audience,

> If soon you do reply,
> Not with a flattering speech, but with
> Sound words to his Glory.
>
> Then oh he will give unto you
> That which will be much more. (73–78)

A rhetorical “flattering speech,” she insists, cannot do meditative work; communing with the divine is possible only to those who utter “Sound” (and therefore honest) “words to his Glory.” The self-conscious language of seduction and servility is clearly unsuited to the poet’s devotional intent, but this does not mean “Sound words” are without their own aim to persuade. In the volume’s twelfth song (“Blessed be thy name oh thou lord” 71-73), Trapnel attributes not only a public but also a persuasive role to the language of the faithful: “Enemies shall know,” she says,

> Their folly great,
> Which Prayer and Songs do show,
> When Songs and Melody come forth,
> Thy wind shall on them blow. (5-8)

Trapnel may even believe that the faithful have an obligation to speak publicly. Those who “openly declare,” she maintains in her seventh song (O that they may say unto Death” 45), “it is they shall come to him, / Whom nothing can compare (41–44). Those who “will not sing to thee” (14), on the other hand, deserve only to see “Pale-faced death” (16).

Like Eliza and Collins, Trapnel indicates that she understands the power of language to express or to discover devotional truth. In her fifth song (“Oh, it is that light that burneth bright” 39-41), she even ventriloquizes the Saviour, whose voice urges us to “believe my word,” and “looke into my records” (78-80). In those records, we are told, we will discover both “what you are unto me” and “what I am for your sakes” (82-84). The speaker here refers to the divine word of Scripture and not the fallible rhetoric of mortals, and Christ himself confirms language’s

capacity to yield up truth and to transform: "And look into the written Word," He goes on,

> and there you shall behold
> How I have beautified, and have
> made you as bright as gold. (85-88)[28]

Christ's words point to the ability of language to shape a truth manifestly different from outward appearance. Confirming the role of language in beautifying truth while urging devotional interiority, the passage points to the idea that the rhetorical and meditative traditions, taken together, can deepen religious understanding. Trapnel's poem thus reflects the "striking shift in rhetorical theory" that Thomas O. Sloan describes, the shift from the "'looking outward' of the classical tradition to a new 'inward dialogue'" ("Rhetoric and Meditation" 51). The beautified and golden believer is discovered not by looking outward, but by turning inward to the imaginative and persuasive power of a new species of rhetoric.

As early modern women writers, Eliza, Collins, and Trapnel issue some rather conventional disclaimers about their ability and intent. Eliza says that "more learned and refined wits" could form her babes in "a more curious shape" and don them "in a more inticing dress" (A3-A3v); Collins asserts her "want of Art" early in her volume, describing herself an "unskilfull" private person ("The Discourse" 21-23); and, although Trapnel reserves comment on the quality of her poetic outpourings, her Relator makes a telling prefatory comment indicating that what her work lacks in rhetorical art it makes up for in spiritual authenticity: "If any may be offended at her Songs," he writes, "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" (A2v). Equally intent on deflecting attention away from themselves, whether by obscuring their identities or deploying strategies that deny exclusive authorship, these women may be more self-effacing and more

[28] The poem twice more exhorts its audience to "look into the written Word" (89 and 101).

reluctant to speak publicly than their antecedents. This tendency or imperative may have much to do with the status of their feminine, withdrawn, and sometimes radical rhetoric, what Wiseman calls the "unsanctioned" rather than "legitimate" kind (190).

It is clear, however, that these women depend on and deploy the art of persuasion to a degree they would likely deny. Yet, as much as Eliza, Collins, and Trapnel may believe in the plainness of the truth they aim to speak, and as consistently plain as their verse may be, this does not mean that their poetry is stylistically indifferent or rhetorically unaware.[29] As Magro argues, it may very well be that "it is because rhetorical proficiency *was not* expected from a woman that Trapnel's words were considered credible" (421). However, the success of what Magro calls Trapnel's "radical performative politics" depends also on the prophet's meditative stance. If the major difference between rhetoric and meditation is that the latter insists, as Sloan puts it, on "the maintenance of a close union between verbal expression and the passions" ("Rhetoric and Meditation" 45), then all three writers are clearly working within the meditative tradition. But if it is also true, as Sloan claims, that meditation shaped rhetoric not so much in the way it is used but in the way it is directed, that is, from the "looking outward" of classical rhetoric to an increasingly "inward dialogue" (51), then Eliza, Collins, and Trapnel were active participants in a rhetorical culture that proves most interesting not for its inconsistency so much as its pursuit of a means of persuasion that struggled with and could sometimes accommodate the growing distinction between public and private.[30]

[29] Price observes that Collins's "self-conscious lack of 'style'" is a common feature of seventeenth-century women's poetry and is "a mode of writing that stands as a code for her innocence and Christian humility" (283).
[30] Yet Collins's admirers seem reluctant to acknowledge her rhetorical skill. Quick to recognize the rhetorical influence in Herbert's poetry, Hurley makes no such claims for this poet: Collins's verse, she says, "is quite different, and for some readers may suffer in contrast" (244-45). On the contrary, Collins's poetry indicates that she shares more with Herbert and with other male poets than Hurley suggests.

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