Chapter 2

At “Liberty to Preach in the Chambers”: Sarah Wight, Henry Jessey, and the New-Modeled Community of Saints

Sarah Wight’s prophetic utterances were transcribed by the Baptist minister Henry Jessey from April to July 1647, in the midst of the violence of the Civil Wars, and published later that year as The Exceeding Riches of Grace. Wight prophesied from her bedroom in a trance, and the transformation of this household space into a public theater recalls Leigh’s fluid movement out of the domestic into the public, prophesy transforming private residence into public spectacle/publication. However, in Wight and Jessey’s book, it is not the family but the conventicle or private religious meeting that forms the basis and model for counterpublic debate. The years 1646–47 saw what one historian has labeled the “counter-revolution,” when London Presbyterians gathered forces to impose uniformity of worship, take over Parliament, and disband the New Model Army.1 In opposition to this religious and political backlash, Jessey and Wight present a millenarian ideal of democratic conference, evoking truth not as a product of state-imposed uniformity but as a process of repeated dialogue and revision. Wight’s prone but articulate presence draws together a diverse group of sectarians, from Baptist ministers to New Model Army chaplains, and helps extend this group’s influence beyond one book to related publications in England, Ireland, and the Netherlands. From within

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the autonomy of the sectarian conventicle, Jessey and Wight rewrite traditional narratives of affliction and conversion to create a female speaking position that emerges out of and vindicates an expansive new-modeled community of saints.

The dialogical thrust of *The Exceeding Riches of Grace*, its adaptation of the collective privacy of the conventicle as public opposition, rests in part in its collaborative authorship. Jessey and Wight’s joint involvement in producing the publication poses a problem for bibliographers trained with a post-Romantic attachment to the individual author. As Susan Wiseman has astutely put it, the shifting nature of authority in prophetic utterance, its movement between female prophet and male amanuensis, earthly vessel and God-the-author, forces us to ask, “where, if anywhere, is the authority, or the voice of authority, in seventeenth-century prophetic discourse by women?” (“Unsilent Instruments” 176). The instability of this circulation of voice and authority has led to the bibliographic erasure of Wight as coauthor of *The Exceeding Riches of Grace*, despite the fact that Wight’s words take up almost half the text and that the original title-page displays both Jessey and Wight’s names, presenting Wight as a vessel of grace and Jessey as merely the publisher and “Eye and Ear-witness.”

This modern bibliographic privileging of text over voice, of publication over performance, forecloses the very issue of authorial instability Wiseman points to in prophetic texts—the sticky question of who is speaking and for whom. In doing so, it effaces the book’s ties to a popular oral culture in which pious word and preacherly performance blend, and its collaborative nature, in which ministerial authority is complemented, even undercut, by lay prophetic power.

The desire for a univocal authority this bibliographic privileging of Jessey presents is continued in a more subtle critical splitting: critics of *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* rarely broach the issue of the text’s complicated pattern of authority head-on. Instead they divide their focus to deal with either Jessey or Wight: feminist critics such as Diane Purkiss and Phyllis Mack rightly emphasize Wight’s acts of self-fashioning and appropriations of gendered subject-positions, but treat Jessey largely as the transparent medium for her public prophesies. Historians such as B.R. White and David Katz mention *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* as part of Jessey’s prodigious religious output during the Revolutionary Period, but leave Wight in the background as the object of his book. More recently, Mary Fissell directly addresses the relation between prophet and amanuensis, yet despite the prominence of Wight’s speeches, Fissell’s focus on the reproductive body tends to cast the book as divided between female body and male