

## Women, Writing, and Healing: Rhetoric, Religion, and Illness in An Collins, “Eliza,” and Anna Trapnel

Lyn Bennett

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**Abstract** Focusing on An Collins, “Eliza,” and Anna Trapnel, this essay considers the interconnections of mind, body, and spirit in the mid-seventeenth century. Given their gender and their era, that the writing of all three serves as a means of expressing religious devotion is not surprising — what may be, however, is the role of illness as both catalyst for and topic of work that is also deeply and consciously rhetorical. Articulating what may be as much illness enabled as it is divinely inspired, their work further suggests a more than merely intuitive sense of language’s capacity to heal body as well as soul.

**Keywords** Illness · Women’s writing · 17th century · Early modern · Medicine · Rhetoric · Collins · Eliza · Trapnel

Latter-day researchers in the fields of medicine, psychology, psychiatry, sociology, anthropology, literary criticism, trauma studies and, of course, rhetoric have in recent decades revealed much about the myriad roles language plays in healing the body as well as the psyche. An “uttering of healing words” (Baumlin and Baumlin 1989, 247),<sup>1</sup> rhetoric has been shown to encompass more than mere oratory, offering a “salutary effect on physical health” even in the most private of its modes (Pennebaker 2000, 5).<sup>2</sup> Such an understanding of rhetoric’s pervasiveness and force is not, however, unique to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Bringing passions “under the obedience of reason,” wrote Thomas Wilson in his 1560 *Art of Rhetoric*, the art of using language to persuade can bring comfort to the weak, healing “private troubles” as well as “common miseries” (102). Though Wilson acknowledges rhetoric’s therapeutic potential and surely also knew that many women must also have suffered “private troubles,” he does not include them in the knowledge or practice of rhetoric. Yet there is ample evidence of both the early modern and recent kinds to suggest that women are particularly attentive persuaders, each fashioning by necessity “her own moral style, her own *ethos*” (Baumlin and Baumlin 1989, 255) in the face of a culture that remains deeply misogynist.

Given that auditors of illness narratives (who are most often physicians), as Judy Segal notes, tend to focus on “patient types,” such a rhetorical necessity becomes even more urgent when women write about, through, or from illness. Collapsing illness into sameness rather than

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L. Bennett (✉)

Department of English, Dalhousie University, PO Box 15000, Halifax, NS B3L 2G9, Canada  
e-mail: lyn.bennett@dal.ca

paying a sick subject's words their proper due, the tendency to reduce sufferers to types, Segal suggests, may be most prevalent in cases of chronic illnesses such as fibromyalgia, a multi-symptomatic condition whose victims are most often female, and whose sufferers are yet associated with the type of the "hysterical malingerer," the notoriously incurable woman of centuries past (2007, 228–29). For early modern women, whose maladies were most often associated with a womb from which came not only the "convulsions, epilepsies, apoplexies, palseyes, hecticke fevers, dropsies, [and] malignant ulcers" John Sadler identifies in *The Sick Womans Private Looking-Glasse* of 1636, but also "no disease so ill but may procede from the evill quality of it" ("Epistle Dedicatory," n.p.), the risk of being reduced to an hysterical and thus effectively silenced medical type may have been even greater.

Despite the many injunctions against women's public speech and the concomitant yet contradictory insistence that they were rhetorically incapable, women of Sadler's day sometimes deigned to give illness a voice. The named but unidentified An Collins, the pseudonymous "Eliza," and the prophet Anna Trapnel may be relatively unknown as women and long ignored as writers, but they were not silenced by gendered expectations. Collins's *Divine Songs and Meditations* was published in 1653, *Eliza's Babes, or the Virgins-Offering* in 1652, and Trapnel's *The Cry of a Stone* in the early months of 1654. Their Interregnum publication means that they appeared during a notably tumultuous period in English history, one that had recently witnessed two Civil Wars culminating in the execution of King Charles I and, though now ruled by Puritan and self-appointed Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell, remained far from uniform in religious belief or social and political ideologies. As well as temporal coincidence, the works share generic kinship in that all three are primarily devotional texts rendered in a combination of verse and prose. Though largely a series of devotional poems, Collins's volume, which she calls "the offspring of my mind" ("The Preface," 79), begins with a short prose preface "To the Reader" and concludes with five verse "meditations." Eliza's book 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 that (like Collins's) appear at the end of the volume. Finally, Trapnel's *The Cry of a Stone* records its author's biographical narrative and the prophecies of her trance-induced visions in prose, the latter also rendered in a series of twelve songs and hymns interspersed throughout.

All three also write about illness, and they do so without succumbing to hysterical type. On the contrary, Collins, Eliza, and Trapnel ignore misogynist inscriptions of female physiology and psychology to predicate on illness their authorial empowerment. Given the historical context, the success of their resistance is, of course, equally inseparable from the authors' devotional orientation; as Kenneth Burke has taught us, religious writing is ever-persuasive in its aim and thus inescapably rhetorical.<sup>3</sup> Relying on religious modes of persuasion while fashioning "her own moral style" and "her own *ethos*," Collins, Eliza, and Trapnel – far from confirming woman's inability even to comprehend "Rhetoricall discourse" ("Epistle Dedicatory," n.p.), as Sadler would have it<sup>4</sup> – prove themselves capable and knowing rhetors, confirming in the process that rhetoric serves as medicine for more than the soul but can sometimes relieve as well as help cope with bodily illness.

### Rhetoric, religion, and illness

In seventeenth-century religious discourse, God is always the primary healer. Most familiar, perhaps, as the Psalmist's divine physician "who "healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds" (Ps. 147.3), His metaphorical role is key in a wide array of devotional

and didactic texts. As early modern writers are wont to do with all things biblical, they invoke the metaphor tirelessly. Appearing in the devotional verse of poets such as John Donne and George Herbert, God the healer also appears in countless early modern treatises. In his 1648 *Cause and Cure of a Wounded Conscience*, for example, Thomas Fuller responds to the rhetorical question of Proverbs 18.14, “But a wounded conscience who can bear,” with the metaphorically fitting answer, “God, like a wise Surgeon, would not open that wound which he never intended to cure” (6). Likewise, Richard Younge in his explicitly curative treatise of 1654, *A Sovereign Antidote Against All Grief*, calls God “the All-wise *Physician*” who knows that mortification is often “the fittest *medicine* for our souls *sickness*, and that we cannot otherwise be *cured*” (165). The seventeenth-century believer’s perceptions of illness thus included the paradoxical understanding that suffering was also a mark of divine favor; hence illness could endow the sufferer with greater religious authority even as it enhanced spiritual understanding.

In both scripture and religious discourse, God is also the ultimate speech act. The force of language to re-create, and thus to heal, is in the first instance implied by the *Logos* that is the genesis of all creation: “In the beginning was the Word,” writes the apostle John, “and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1.1).<sup>5</sup> Only the divine “Let there be light” has the power to create *ex nihilo*, but this does not mean that God’s language is utterly inimitable. Wilson, for one, indicates that the symbiosis of language and healing, made explicit in the following example of comfort, may never be wholly distinct from religious belief: advising that “A constant Christian should bear all misery, and with patience abide the force of necessity, showing with sufferance the strength of his faith” (1560, 107), Wilson reminds his readers that every human is a reflection of the Creator and, by so doing, further implies the healing possibilities of words that may be less than divine. In a somewhat different vein, John Prideaux confirms the transformative power of language in his 1659 publication on “sacred eloquence.” In his religious and rhetorical treatise, Prideaux observes that meditating on God’s word “gave *David more understanding than all his teachers*, *Psal.* 119.19 proved a *Hammer to Jeremy*, that *breaketh the rocks in pieces*, *chap.* 23.29 was *St. Pauls Engine*, for the *pulling down of strongholds*” (A2v). His words may not confirm but do insinuate the capacity of sacred rhetoric to create, destroy, and re-create, and according to Prideaux’s exegesis, its power is at least figuratively accessible also to those created in God’s image.

As Prideaux’s rather violent images suggest, divine language is not always kind. “*The word of God*,” he also notes in a reference to Hebrews, “*is quick and powerfull, and sharper then any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the beast*, *Heb.* 4. 12” (A2r). The religious writer Thomas Calvert develops the figure further, invoking in his 1647 text a metaphor of written language: “We do not always finde God writing pleasant Epistles to his children,” he writes in *Heartsalve for a Wounded Soule*, but “he sometimes writes bitter things” (68). Paradoxically, though, wounding is not only a destructive trope. To the extent that it plays a role in generating the Word, God’s unkindness also creates. In his rhetorical analysis of Paul’s epistle to the Philippian, Gregory Bloomquist suggests as much when he shows that suffering may be “a crucial mechanism in the birth and growth of the gospel” (2007, 277). Though accessible only in partnership with the faith necessary to believe in the possibility of healing, wounds both physical and spiritual may be what give “sacred eloquence” form in the first place; that Scriptural *enargeia*, the rhetorical virtue of what Aristotle calls bringing-before-the-eyes, seems so often to depend on physical suffering imposed by a God whose *Logos* also heals may in itself suggest as much.

Pointing to the seemingly endless scenes of divinely imposed woundings found in the Hebrew Bible, Elaine Scarry notes “they recur so frequently” that

no reader, Jewish or Christian, will have failed to notice them, and few readers, Jewish or Christian, will have failed to be troubled by them. God’s invisible presence is asserted, made visible, in the perceivable alterations he brings about in the human body: in the necessity of human labor and the pains of childbirth, in a flood that drowns, in a plague that descends on a house, in the brimstone and fire falling down on a city . . . and so on, on and on. (1985, 183)

For the Hebrew God, the power to inflict suffering goes hand-in-hand with the power to heal, and both are integrally bound up with the Word. The parallel presentation of suffering and healing is also notably manifest in a passage from Deuteronomy, its highly rhetorical fashioning further underscoring the centrality of language in every divine act: “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god with me: I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal: neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand” (Deut. 32.39). The repetition marked by the end *antistrophe* of the two opening clauses (“that I, even I”), together with the beginning *anaphoric* “I” of the final four, mimics the alpha-to-omega omniscience and omnipotence of the divine, thus rhetorically reinforcing as well as enacting the oneness of God and His Word. The passage also presents the *hypozeuxis* of varied repetition (the “I” remains the same, but the verb changes), the *polysyndeton* of repeated conjunction, and the *isocolon* of clausal balance, which together enact the endless (and perhaps inevitable) cycle of wounding and healing, death and resurrection, that is a product of the *Logos*.

The passage from Deuteronomy thus formally replicates the larger Scriptural pattern Scarry identifies. In writing that “Man can only be created once, but once created, he can be endlessly modified; wounding re-enacts the creation because it re-enacts the power of alteration that has its first profound occurrence in creation” (1985, 183), she also reiterates a cycle of creation and re-creation that was a given in early modern narratives of devotion. Rather than the locus of complaint, however, divinely ordained suffering was more often the focus of a discourse of tolerance. The decorous response was not “to murmur against the dispensations of God,” as Samuel Clarke puts it in his 1659 *Marrow of Divinity*, “but shew Christian fortitude notwithstanding, and overcoming all these assaults” (56). Writers both secular and religious urge such appropriateness when they, like Younge, advise acceptance, and even alacrity, in the face of endless suffering: “neither *rage* at the *Chirurgion*, as mad-men,” he urges in a suggestive conflation of wounder and healer, “nor swoun under his hand, as *Milk-sops*; but consider with whom thou hast to do: *The Lord, the Lord strong, merciful, and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in goodness and truth*” (1654, 165).

Accordingly, and with the understanding that her illness is “by divine Providence” (1), Collins accepts her condition without complaint. It seems that her fortitude may even have transformed physical sickness to “delightful” condition: “it pleased God to give me Writing,” she says, and she is not ungrateful for a providential kindness that came from a wounding dispensation. Such may be among the “Advantages of Sicknesse” Jeremy Taylor writes of in his 1651 *Rule and Exercise of Holy Dying*. Illness, he says, is “a little image of the state of blessed Souls, or of Adams early morning in Paradise, free from the troubles of lust, and violencies of anger, and the intricacies of ambition, or the restlesnesse of covetousnesse,” thus within it the “soul shall finde some rest from labouring in the galleys, and baser captivity of sin” (109). Collins’s soul was thus the greatest beneficiary of her illness-enabled writing: though not without bodily benefit, “the helps I had therein were small” (1), she soon admits. Yet Collins may have gained much more than any physical remedy could bring. “[T]he least grain of the increase of *grace*,” avers Younge, “is more worth, then can be equalled with whole

pounds of *bodily vexation*.” In the end, Collins may not want to alleviate her physical suffering altogether if she believes, with Younge, that those “whole pounds of *bodily vexation*” should be taken as “tokens and pledges of *Gods love* and favour, who loves his Children so, as not to make *wantons* of them” (1654, 166). Her illness may, in fact, be her means of salvation; according to Taylor, sometimes “sickness is a messenger sent from a chastising Father,” and “None but suffering, humble, and patient persons can go to heaven” (1651, 121–24).

Like Younge and other male contemporaries, Eliza reiterates the trope of sickness as cure in her preface “To the Reader,” where she claims, like “that one in ten” of John’s gospel who returned “a cleansed Leaper,” to have earned the right and ability to speak because she has been spiritually healed through divine grace (A3).<sup>6</sup> Hence Eliza also recognizes bodily illness as divinely afflicted. The poem “Being in Paine” confirms as much in its opening lines, “Lord, if my sin produce my paine,” she pleads, “Pray let me never sin againe” (lines 1–2). Unlike Collins, however, Eliza sees her suffering not as a token of divine favor, but as the undesirable consequence of misbehavior: “pain is grievous unto me,” she goes on,

And sin is hatefull unto thee.  
Let me not do what troubleth thee,  
And thou’lt not send what grieve shall me. (lines 3–6)

Because Eliza does not make it clear which is more important to her, not grieving God or not suffering grief herself, her words may be less unambiguously pious than Collins’s. Though physical pain for its own sake is not something she will endure gladly, she does, however, also acknowledge that suffering, if purposeful, is sometimes welcome. “But if my patience Lord thou tryest,” she goes on,

If I will bear, what thou applyest,  
To cure the malady of sin,  
Cease not my pain, but send’t again;  
For pain I rather would endure,  
Then grieve thine eyes of light so pure. (48, lines 7–12)

The poet is much more willing to suffer if her illness entails a spiritual as well as physical test. Ironically, pain is a gift from God if it is meant to cure as well as punish “the malady of sin.” In Eliza’s paradoxical and not atypical formulation, wounding and healing become an oxymoronic mark of divine favor.

Trapnel may not indicate that her original fever was divinely inflicted but, as the means through which she was given “faith to believe from that Scripture” (*Stone*, A2r), it clearly served a divine purpose. Her self-appointed scribe, however, notes that she was “seized upon by the Lord” when she later fell into her famous 12-day trance, in which she

was carried forth in a spirit of Prayer and Singing, from noon till night [. . .] And finding her natural strength going from her, she took her bed at 11 a clock in the night, where she lay from that day, being the seventh day of the month, to the 19th day of the same month, in all 12 days together; The first 5 days neither eating nor drinking anything more or less, and the rest of the time once in 24. h, sometimes eat a very little toast in small Be[e]r. (*Stone*, Ar)

Endorsed by Scripture and religious discourse, fasting is key to one’s propensity to receive the Word not only for Trapnel. Indeed, Henry Scudder’s brief 1631 discussion

of the topic includes no less than five references that “prove fasting to be a Christian duty”:

Our Lord and Saviour said, [Mat. 9. 15] that his Disciples after his departure from them should fast; & giveth direction unto all touching [Mat. 6. 16 17] priuate fasts. The Apostle [1 Cor. 7. 5] speaketh of the husbands and wiues abstaining from the marriage bed, that they might giue themselvs to fasting and prayer: And wee haue the practise of the [Act. 13. 2, 3 Act. 14. 23] Apostles againe and again for publike fasts. (72)

It may be as well that, as Hilary Hinds puts it, women especially needed to ensure that they were the fasting-induced “empty vessels” on which depended “the signifying capabilities of words and bodies” (1996, 144).<sup>7</sup> Fasting is also a practice undertaken largely by choice, and it was also universally understood that, although “Christian fortitude” demands “that some portion and period of our lives be assigned to passive graces,” as Taylor says, God also demanded active virtue (1651, 124).<sup>8</sup> For Trapnel, the active virtue made visible as fasting may have been as integral to her persuasive force as the words she spoke. It may be that “because rhetorical proficiency *was not* expected from a woman that Trapnel’s words were considered credible,” as Maria Magro claims, but her rhetorical success depended as much on her body as her language (2004, 421).<sup>9</sup>

Trapnel does, however, make it clear that her illness was cured not by her own language but by godly intervention. In a lesser reenactment of the Resurrection, she writes in the account of her inspirational fever, the Savior told her that “After 2 days I will revive thee” and “the 3rd day I will raise thee up, and thou shalt live in my sight.” Exercising the interpretive license afforded the divinely sanctioned exegete, Trapnel puts her own spin on his promise, “which 2 days were 2 weeks,” she explains in temporal equivalence, “that I should lye in that feaver, and that very time that it took me, that very hour it should leave me, and I should rise and walk, which was accordingly” (*Stone*, A2r). Trapnel’s words also imply that the interconnection of utterance and healing she describes may be manifest most perfectly in Christ, in whom the “Word was made flesh” (John 1.14). As an earthly miracle worker, “Jesus went about all the cities and villages,” the gospels tell us, “teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people” (Matt. 9.35). Teaching and preaching, both of which depend on rhetorical effectiveness for their success, are linked in Matthew’s formulation as two parts in a trinity of divine action, the third of which is healing. Healing is, of course, necessary only because there is also wounding by illness or injury; human and divine are thus caught up in an endless cycle of injury and repair set in motion by the Word that gave humanity being in the first place. Where Christ is concerned, language and healing may not coexist with a great many woundings, but their shared significance nevertheless mirrors the eloquence that is the Father’s.<sup>10</sup>

For His lesser human images, “Sacred eloquence is,” as Prideaux claims, “a Logically kind of Rhetorick, to be used in Prayer, Preaching or Conference; to the glory of God, and the convincing, instructing, and strengthening our brethren” (1659, A2r). In these terms, Collins, Eliza, and Trapnel prove equally eloquent. As Collins puts it in “A Song demonstrating The vanities of Earthly things,” the learning of geometry, geography, and astronomy may lead one to “mis of heaven and heavenly blis” (line 31), while “they that delight in Divinity” and are “exquisite in Theology, / Much heavenly comfort in this life may gain” (lines 33–35). Clearly participating in religious discourse in the passage following her prose rendering of “Psalm 56. Vers. 10,” Eliza makes clear the kind of words she writes: “And when you read these lines,” she advises in *antimetabolic* form, “mistake not a Divine affection, for a Poetical fancy; for I affect not to express my fancy, but I would have my fancy express my affection” (A4r). Writing “to advance Christ, and not for any by-end” (*Report and Plea*, 6), Trapnel likewise



reiterates the crux of the larger narrative and, throughout her work, evinces not only an awareness of what Hinds describes as the “necessary harmony between language and truth” (1996, 125), but also a manifest desire to achieve it. As much as the rhetoric-loathing Levellers to come, Collins, Eliza, and Trapnel may in their own way also recognize that “in the real world,” as Rachel Foxley puts it, “rhetoric might be truth’s only effective ally” (2006, 282).<sup>11</sup> All three women write “to the glory of God” and, in their “convincing, instructing, and strengthening” aim, they are full (if unwilling) participants in the “Logicall kind of Rhetorick” that marks the history of sacred eloquence.

Drawing on and participating in a larger discourse does not, however, also mean that these women must faithfully replicate its terms. Trapnel certainly creates a moral style and *ethos* that distances her language from that of the clerical pack. In her account of a minister who promised to satisfy those who spoke against her, she later discovered a very empty rhetoric; instead he “hath reproached me and other friends that are of more worth then I.” “[A]ll these words,” she concludes, “and many other more, amounted to just nothing; it was but Clergie-puff, which soon was gone like a puff of winde that is almost at an end, as soon as it riseth, and so was his fair speech to me” (*Report and Plea*, 19). “Clergie-puff” is precisely the kind of rhetoric that Collins, Eliza, and Trapnel are able to transcend because they are not clergy but are divinely ordained. As Eliza puts it in “The Support,” “I dare not say, I am an ignorant woman, and unfit to write, for if thou wilt declare they goodness, and thy mercy be weak and contemptible means, who can resist thy will” (75) or, as Collins writes in her “Verses on the twelvth Chapter of *Ecclesiastes*,” others “have no Scripture (I suppose) / Save what they wrest unto their own Perdicion” (lines 61–62). What she has that others do not is a spiritual understanding that comes also through the body: “the word with bower goes,” she maintains on in a reference to Hebrews 4.12,<sup>12</sup>

Twixt Soul & Spirit by divine commission  
Twixt joynts and marow it doth penetrate,  
Seeing all secrets, heart can meditate. (lines 63–66)

Eliza and Trapnel imply, and Collins makes clear that, because God’s omniscience extends deep into the “joynts and marow” as well as the “Soul & Spirit,” the Word cannot be fully heard without a heightened awareness of the body. One cannot transcend what one does not know, and sometimes that knowledge comes to the faithful through the peculiar advantages of illness. Unlike the minister who promised to deliver but healed nothing, Collins, Eliza, and Trapnel utter a right rhetoric that, contrary to a blowhard emptiness of mere words, actually gets something done.

### Women, writing, and healing

Taken together, Collins, Eliza, and Trapnel offer more than a passing glimpse into a telling moment in women’s medical and rhetorical history, one shaped by illness as well as devotion. Because of her lifelong affliction, Collins tells us in the epistle that opens her *Divine Songs and Meditations*, she has “been restrained from bodily employments” and enforced “to a retired Course of life” (1). Though Collins elsewhere hints at the nature of her malady, she remains undiagnosed; a paucity of textual evidence, together with the wealth of chronic illnesses thought to afflict early modern women, make it difficult even to venture a guess.<sup>13</sup> More important than the identity of her sickness, at any rate, is what the otherwise self-effacing Collins was able to discover because of it; as Gottlieb notes, there is much in Collins’s work to suggest that “illness, weakness, and bodily pain were more than devotional or expressive

devices” (1997, 218). Rather than debilitating her psyche as well as her body, Collins found that she gained “such enlargedness of mind, and activity of spirit, so that this seeming desolate condition, proved to me most delightful.” Her necessary confinement, it appears, enabled an “activity of spirit” that compelled Collins to write, leading her to become “affected to Poetry, insomuch that I proceeded to practise the same.” The reciprocity of writing and understanding familiar to everyone who has written soon became known to Collins: writing poetry, she claims, “appeared unto me so amiable, as that it enflamed my faculties, to put forth themselves, in a practise so pleasing” (1). The comfort and inspiration Collins discovered through her illness-enabled writing gave both being and shape to an *ethos* that ultimately proves as self-assured as it is modest.<sup>14</sup>

As far as we know, neither Eliza nor Trapnel suffered from a chronic physical malady. Eliza may, in fact, be better known for writing about *not* suffering. In the collection of poetry and meditations titled *Eliza's Babes*, the author repeatedly reminds us that her literary offspring are “The Souls sweet Babes” that “do bring no pain” (“On Marriage,” line 11). Eliza’s is, however, a familiar metaphor for poetic production that, like “ejaculation,” notes Elizabeth Clarke, is often “associated with discourses which stress the agency of God and the passivity of the human author in composition” (2000, 222).<sup>15</sup> We do know, at any rate, that Eliza’s is not a literal account of painless childbirth, since she repeatedly indicates that she had no actual children. She does, however, take up actual, physical suffering in the consecutive poems “Being in Paine” and “Being taken with a sudden pain on the Day appointed for God’s publick Service” (48–49). “Let not this pain,” she writes in the latter, “Lord, deter me,”

From publick offering praise to thee.  
 Though private prayers may pleasing bee  
 From others, and as well from me.  
 But publick blessings thou giv’st me,  
 And publick praise I’d offer thee. (lines 1–6)

Unlike Collins, Eliza does not here claim that she meant for her words to praise God only in private.<sup>16</sup> That “publick praise” is more appropriate than “private prayers” in giving thanks for “publick blessings” she confirms also in “To the Reader,” where she tells us that her reluctance to send her *Babes* “into the world” was thoroughly overcome by the determination to give “publique thanks, for such infinite and publique [*sic*] favours” (57–58). That she was kept from doing so because of a “pain” suggests that Eliza’s physical malady provided not only the poem’s inspiration but also the means of strengthening her resolve; the forced restraint of sudden illness, it seems, made her more assured in her insistence on making a “publick offering.”

In the self-authored testimony preceding the dictated prophecies of *The Cry of a Stone*, Trapnel also writes of an illness that led to self-assertion. Evidently, she also produced speech persuasive enough to be threatening, as her later imprisonment for speaking out against Cromwell and his regime attests.<sup>17</sup> It all began “Seven years ago,” she says,

I being visited with a feaver, given over by all for dead, the Lord then gave me faith to believe from that Scripture . . . From this time, for a whole year after, the Lord made use of me for the refreshing of afflicted and tempted ones, inwardly and outwardly. (*Stone* A2r)

It may be that Trapnel’s confident self-assertion was largely predicated on a psychic rather than physical anomaly, given that the “ground of women’s authority as spiritual leaders,” Phyllis Mack claims in her study of seventeenth-century sectarian women, “was their achievement of complete self-transcendence” (1992, 5). Trapnel’s famous trances, which by their very



nature demand self-effacement, may have been a major source of spiritual authority, but in a culture in which “bodily weakness,” as Diane Purkiss argues, “acted as a signifier for prophetic empowerment” (1992, 145), her “feaver” also allowed her to assert her own authority in the process of establishing her credibility as God’s mouthpiece. Like Collins and Eliza, Trapnel presents illness as an authorial catalyst, and it is from that illness that she finds the possibility of self-assertion while, rather paradoxically, simultaneously effacing the self through the submission necessitated by entrenchment. In one way or another, the rhetoric of Collins, Eliza, and Trapnel is characterized by an *ethos* that is at once self-effacing and self-asserting, and illness is the vehicle that allows all three to participate knowingly in the extant, and very powerful, discourse from which women were overwhelmingly excluded.<sup>18</sup>

That she writes within that discourse Eliza makes clear in a preemptive response to her anticipated (and perhaps inevitable) detractors: asserting her God-given right to speak, “Let them know,” she writes in “To the Reader,” “that if they did rightly apprehend the infinite mercies of God to them, they could not be silent.” Eliza does “them” one better as she goes on to assert a possibly superior understanding of devotional obligation, “And if they do not thinke the mercies of God worth publique thanks; I do, and therefore I will not be ashamed” (A3). For Eliza, devotional tribute is not a mere prerogative, and she argues that shamefulness does not accrue to those who assert their right to speak thanks but to those whose acts of omission suggest they believe God undeserving. In its religious content and rhetorical bent, Eliza’s *aetiologia* in itself suggests conscious participation in a larger discourse. Defined as a “figure of reasoning by which one attributes a cause for a statement or claim made, often as a simple relative clause of explanation,” *Silva Rhetoricæ*’s example sounds remarkably akin to Eliza’s: “So, as much as in me is,” reads the passage from Romans, “I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (1.15–16). Alluding to a text as familiar as it is overtly rhetorical, Eliza inserts her voice within the mid-century’s dominant narrative while asserting her place in a larger forum by reiterating gospel truth as personal belief.<sup>19</sup>

Trapnel is more explicit about paying verbal tribute, asserting a divinely ordained duty even to help heal others in claiming that “the Lord made use of me for the refreshing of afflicted and tempted ones” (*Stone*, A2r). Later, in her *Report and Plea*, she writes in typically self-effacing fashion that she is “unworthy to be compared with any of the holy men or women reported of in the Scripture,” but nevertheless can assert her right to speak because “Christ lives in me” (A2v). Like Eliza, Trapnel asserts an authority both God-given and justified by illness to insinuate her moral and spiritual superiority. Rhetorically, she indulges in a moment of *paralepsis* in claiming that she will not speak out against the malice of others against her. Doing what she says she will not do in the process of saying so, “The Lord knows,” Trapnel self-effacingly insists, that “I would not reach out tongue, hand nor pen, to right myself, or to seek restauration of my loss,” thus managing to rebuke her detractors while going on to assert that she rises above them: “I wave that,” she concludes, “such a thing is below my spirit” (*Report and Plea*, A2v).

Like Trapnel’s, Collins’s self-effacing *ethos* admits that “sounder judgments” may “declare / The ground of Truth more in a Gospel-way” (“The Preface” lines 85–86) and “More plainly shew the path-way to Salvacion” (line 91) but is also self-asserting in invoking a religious duty that overrides social decorum: modesty, she insists, “cannot prevail to hinder me, / From publishing those Truthes I do intend” (lines 92–93). Collins calls on the narrative of faithful obligation, and she inserts her text clearly within established, male-dominated religious discourse, following its rhetorical lead in both citing scripture, as Ann Hurley observes, and “listing the relevant scriptural verse in the margins of her verse” (2001, 234). Collins may

expressly reject rhetoric when she likens its “colours” that “glose” to “cloth most foully staind” (“A Song composed in time of the Civill Warr” lines 21 and 24) and exposes theological sophists who aim “by Elocution / And Hellish Logick to traduce” (“Another Song” lines 22–23), but she cannot utterly evade the conventions that had long given voice to the rhetorical tradition in which she is also immersed. Like all religious writers, she asserts her right to relate “the ground of Truth” (“The Discourse” line 708) she has come to understand and is equally concerned that the Christian soul shall “full persuasion see” and thereby gain the “strength of Faith” (“The Discourse” lines 566–67) she already knows.<sup>20</sup>

Invoking, or at least alluding to, a discourse that asserts the responsibility of believers to profess and share what they have discovered, Eliza, Trapnel, and Collins replicate the terms of a larger religious narrative. In the process of doing so, all three reiterate “the commitments inherited from previous ‘speech acts’ publicly performed” Thomas Farrell identifies as a feature of much rhetorical discourse (1985, 119). Collins, however, goes beyond the merely allusive and firmly positions herself within that discourse when she makes Farrell’s connection explicit; her aim, she makes clear in “The Preface” is “rather former workes to vindicate / Than any new conception to relate” (“The Preface” lines 13–14). In vindicating “former workes,” Collins, rather ironically, insists on her own self-effacement. That she asserts through illness-enabled writing an intuitive – and thus inevitably self-effacing – “got by heart” belief in “sacred principles” (“The Discourse” line 208) within the terms of an established, recognizable discourse, her words further imply rhetoric’s value in healing the self.<sup>21</sup> It is only a short step from using language to heal oneself to using language to heal others – and it may even be a Christian obligation. “If thou wilt be importunate in prayer,” William Fenner urges in his *Practical Divinitie* of 1647, “labour to reform thy household” (107),<sup>22</sup> and it may be just as small a step from laboring to reform one’s household to healing one’s community. That they believed they could do so through publication Eliza and Collins make clear, while Trapnel seems to have understood not only the particular “power of written language” in asserting the need for religious reform but also, Hinds proposes, “the physical effect it can have on the reader” (1996, 126). Collins, Eliza, and Trapnel may be justified in asserting themselves when compelled by religious duty, but the means of doing so may come about only because they also write about and through the healing power of devotion in their private lives and, in Trapnel’s case at least, anticipate physical as well as spiritual changes for their readers.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> James Baumlin and Tita French Baumlin draw heavily on the work of psychoanalyst Thomas Szasz, explaining the ways in which the latter’s work confirms that “rhetoric mirrors psychology, each mapping the effect of *logos* or language upon *psyche*,” and thus appeals inevitably to “the emotional as well as moral and political health of its audience” (1989, 246–47). All three aspects of health may be just as inevitably bound up in any spiritual appeal of the mid-seventeenth century, when religious discourse may have appealed to emotions, morality, and politics more than at any other time in English history.

<sup>2</sup> Pennebaker and his colleagues have done extensive research on the relationship of writing and healing; their work is also complemented by “several dozen studies from multiple laboratories around the world” demonstrating the positive health effects of therapeutic writing on subjects of varying occupations, social classes, and ethnic groups (2000, 5).

<sup>3</sup> “The subject of religion,” Burke writes, “falls under the head of rhetoric in the sense that rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and religious cosmogonies are designed, in the last analysis, as exceptionally thoroughgoing modes of persuasion” (1970, v).

<sup>4</sup> In deploying a devotional rhetoric of their own, Collins, Eliza, and Trapnel equally disprove Sadler’s belief that, because his anticipated audience was female, he had out of necessity “stooped to your capacities in omitting hard words and Rhetorical phrases” so as not “to confound your understandings with a more Rhetorical discourse” (“Epistle Dedicatory,” n.p.) Curiously, this epistle is followed by two additional paratexts in Latin. Given that few women were formally educated in Sadler’s day, it is debatable whether he presumed his readers were accomplished enough to know Latin, and we can thus read his previous comments as meant in jest, or whether he assumed his female audience would not be able to read the texts, and we can therefore interpret his linguistic choice as a means of proving his point. Given the context, it seems easier to believe that he meant to remind women of their intellectual inferiority.

<sup>5</sup> Other examples of the generating power of the Word are found in Psalm 36, “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth” (line 6), and in Isaiah’s “The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever” (40.8).

<sup>6</sup> L.E. Semler, Eliza’s modern editor, notes that the figure of the “cleansed Leaper” comes from Luke 17.12–19; the one in ten is the sole leper who gave glory to God after being cured (2001, 139).

<sup>7</sup> The very public context of Trapnel’s trance may suggest an aim to ensure that her body reached its signifying potential, especially in contrast with the transcendent experiences of other visionaries. Jane Shaw has more recently suggested that Trapnel saw her fast-induced suffering as evidence of her piety (2002, 109), while a closer contemporary of the prophetess, William Tyndall, writes in his biography of John Bunyan, that “The sickness which fell upon her as upon Bunyan was more sociable than his; for she admitted the public to the infirmary of her body and soul, and displayed her curious motions, delirium and fits of ravishment and palsy to the fascinated and devout” (qtd in Berg and Berry 1981, 48).

<sup>8</sup> “The submitting to God’s will in suffering,” Henry Hammond confirms in his 1659 discussion of the Psalms, “is but a very moderate degree of Christian fortitude” (493).

<sup>9</sup> It may be that Trapnel and others of her ilk, as Phyllis Mack argues, lived in “a culture in which spiritual suffering and communication with the divine were viewed as real, indeed normative experiences,” and that visionary women were thus “far from being a marginalized, hysterical fringe group in seventeenth-century society” (Mack 1992, 93). Yet Trapnel may have had to work harder to be heard than Mack’s view indicates. Magro implies as much when she suggests that Trapnel needed to use all of the tools at her disposal, which saw “Language and body work together to convince the spectator that Trapnel is the ‘real thing’” (2004, 415). Carefully establishing a persuasive *ethos*, Segal notes, is just as important for the sick person today: “A claim that is substantially weak (logos),” she says, “may be rehabilitated when the speaker shows him/herself to be trustworthy (ethos) or, at least, composed (pathos)” (2007, 237).

<sup>10</sup> The Word who is flesh does, however, bring another kind of suffering in his divine incarnation, what Richard Sibbes describes in his 1639 discussion as a “sickness of love to Christ.” Sibbes’s metaphorical rendering collapses distinctions between body and soul and, in keeping with the trinitarian injunction that its three parts are equally aspects of the divine, suggests a conflation of wounder and healer not so different from the Hebrew God’s. The interconnection of flesh and spirit in religious devotion is confirmed even in his work’s visceral title, *Bowels opened, or, A discovery of the neere and deere love, union and communion betwixt Christ and the Church, and consequently betwixt Him and every believing soule*. One is fortunate enough to suffer such a sickness

only if our love bee in such a degree, as it makes us sick of it, it makes us not to heare what wee heare, not to see, what wee see, not to regard what is present: the soul is in a kind of extasie, it is carried so strongly and taken up with things of Heaven, it is deaded to other things, when our eyes are no more led with vanity, then if wee had none, and the flesh is so mortified, as if wee were dead men, by reason of the strength of our affections that runne another way to better things which are above . . . Thus wee see it is in love. (312)

<sup>11</sup> Foxley also notes that “‘Rhetorical’ appears as a pejorative term in Leveller writing “‘alongside ‘scholastical’, ‘sophistical’, ‘syllogistical’, ‘glosses’, ‘long set speeches’, and so on. Almost anything that smacks of scholarliness can thus be bracketed with rhetoric. The Levellers critique genuine elements of rhetorical theory, but they also denounce ‘rhetoric’ in the general sense in which we often understand the word today” (2006, 270–71). Despite their protests, Foxley demonstrates, the Levellers indulged in a great deal of rhetoric of their own.

<sup>12</sup> God’s knowledge, the biblical passage reads, is “piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

<sup>13</sup> Collins's specific illness is unknown, but she does allude to some of its symptoms. Sarah E. Skwire observes that barrenness may be implied by the non-appearing "flowers" and lack of "hopefull bud" or "fruitfull bough" referred to in "Another Song (The Winter of My Infancy)" (1999, 13). Other diagnoses might, as Gottlieb suggests, be inferred through images that may hint at smallpox or an anatomical anomaly (1997, 219).

<sup>14</sup> Collins claims in her longest poem that her volume was intended for "private use" and not "publick view" ("The Discourse," lines 15–17). Though I do not agree with the notion that a private purpose necessarily renders a work non-rhetorical, other evidence does suggest that Collins did not write without the public in mind. The denial of a public intent marks a rhetorical gesture not exclusive to women. Scudder, a self-identified "preacher of the word" (and therefore a public speaker by profession), for example, ends the subtitle of his 1631 *The Christians Daily Walke* with the claim that his manual was "First intended for private use," but is "now (through importunity) published for the common good."

<sup>15</sup> The metaphor hearkens from antiquity, and is familiar in the early modern period from the sonnet sequences of writers like Philip Sidney and Samuel Daniel. But the offspring metaphor is not exclusive to poets anymore than it belongs only to women writers. In 1648's *The Cause and Cure*, Fuller writes that "This Booke is my eldest Offspring, which had it beene a Sonne, (I mean, had it been a Worke of Masculine beauty and bignesse) it should have waited as a Page in Dedication to his *Honour* [her brother, Edward, Lord Montague]. But finding it to be of the weaker sexe, little in strength and low in stature, may it be admitted (*Madam*) to attend on your *Ladiship*, his *Honours* sister" ("Epistle Dedicatory to Frances Mannours" [dated Jan.25. 1646] A3v).

<sup>16</sup> The pseudonym may indicate that "Eliza" may really have meant to remain out of the public eye. She certainly suggests as much in "To a friend at Court," where she claims to relish "sweet retirednesse" (line 5) because "quiet thought contenteth" (line 4) as well as in "My pleasing Life," where she praises the "Sweet quiet, sweet obscurity" that "best pleaseth" (lines 1–2). In other poems, however, she belies her professed wish for obscurity in boldly writing "To the King" and "To Generall Cromwell."

<sup>17</sup> Berg and Berry suggest that, in a period marked "not only by Civil War but also by a fierce and bitter debate over the possession of meaning," female prophesying was threatening because it usurped an otherwise masculine "verbal transmission of the *logos*" (1981, 50). Kate Chedgzoy further observes that, if Trapnel had been seen "as merely eccentric and ludicrous, there would have been no need for the authorities to harass and imprison her" (1996, 242).

<sup>18</sup> See Bennett (2011) for a full discussion of the ways in which the three writers' contradictory tendencies of effacement and assertion attest to their engagement with changing conceptions of public and private and thus their knowing participation in rhetorical culture.

<sup>19</sup> That she means to participate in a larger narrative is also clear in poetic terms; as Michael Rex notes, Eliza, like many authors of religious lyrics in her day, "saw her work as following in the footsteps of George Herbert's *The Temple*" (2001, 208).

<sup>20</sup> That Collins's writing is consciously rhetorical Hurley also implies in noting that the arrangement of the poems and meditations in her volume "is quite clearly a calculated one" (2001, 235).

<sup>21</sup> Wendy Ryden describes her work teaching therapeutic writing to New York cancer patients in the aftermath of the September 2001 World Trade Center attacks, suggesting that her own experience has taught her a similar lesson, that writing about one's experience with illness (and trauma) aids psychic healing, primarily because it encourages writers "to analyze and work through the implications of any given experience by morphing that experience into text" (2005, 58), an assertion relevant here to the extent that seventeenth-century psychic healing involved the recommitment of one's faith.

<sup>22</sup> "When Jacob was to call on God, he said to his household, Put away your strange gods," Fenner goes on in a reference to Genesis 35 (1647, 107). There were, of course, also many who argued against public speech by the unordained, a debate that escalated with the mid-century rise in sectarianism. In his 1642 treatise, for instance, John Bewick indicates in the subtitle that it aims to prove "that preaching of the Word is a peculiar calling to be undertaken by none without a speciall call."

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