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From Public Authority to Private Marginality?

Early Modern Women Prophets in Italy and England.

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Prophecy has to do with the entitlement to speak in public, either in the holy circle of the *ekklesia* or in the public square. As the fundamental form of the principle of authority in human affairs, in a Spinozian fashion, prophecy is thus about the subjects who are included or excluded, legitimate or illegitimate in society. If these are women, in play there are also issues of sexual relations of power. Therefore, prophecy concerns the boundaries of democracy in its more radical meaning (Prodi 2016), but also the relationship between the political domain and the nature of the Church, intended as institutionalized prophecy (Prodi 2013).

The research proposal aims at investigating, first of all, the political value of female prophecy, as a distinctive feature of early modern society and Church. Prophecy can be reckoned the measure of the political role of women in early modernity, being a true example of political theology, as mutual osmosis between politics and theology. Since female prophets who commit to prophesying were moved by a more or less overt political intention of reformation, wishing the inner change of social and ecclesiastical relations of power, one may be puzzled by the broad reputation and esteem they enjoyed for a long time, not just among the lower classes but also in the main centers of political and religious power. Before starting to persecute women prophets via imprisonments and executions, these ecclesiastical and political authorities were frequently the sources of recognition of the prophetess' charisma. While prophecy could be used by the female prophet as an instrument to promote social justice and religious reform, and as a mode of authority, for political and religious leaders at stake there was clearly a question of legitimacy. Thus, the research project aims to analyse the relationship between prophetesses and political and religious actors in two different historical contexts, XVI century Italy and XVII century England, both characterized by religious and political turmoil.

Female prophecy in the early modern period has been a hotly debated issue between the end of the 1980s and the 1990s, at the height of a new interest crossing the history of religion and women's history, questioning the idea that the political value of prophecy does

not just lie in its propagandistic function. Gabriella Zarri, Adriano Prosperi, Adelisa Malena, Anna Scattigno, Vittoria Fiorelli, Lucetta Scaraffia had given a great contribution to the birth of a new research field on female mystics and “living saints” in the Italian context, in line with the ground-breaking study on the Italian heretics (Cantimori 1939) that revealed a social climate of anti-intellectualism, scepticism, anti-rationalism and appeal to a return to the Sacred Scriptures. In the English context, prophetesses – especially in the Quaker congregations, but also in other nonconformist sects – have been the topic of multiple studies by Phyllis Mack, Steve Davies, Elaine Hobby, Paul Saltzman, Hilary Hinds, Teresa Feroli. Prophecy was defined as a mode of female authority conveying a critique of male power in Church and State, but also as a way of creating the self and producing female political identity in a hierarchically ordered world.

Drawing on this rich research landscape, the present research project wants to reconstruct the experience of early modern Italian and English prophetesses who, by challenging orthodoxy, at the same time challenged their exclusion from the religious and public sphere. By comparing two national experiences of prophesying, something which has not been done before, I will try to ascertain whether there are common elements leading to the establishment of an autonomous role of women in official and unofficial religion (Established Church and sects), a presence that constantly blurs the borders between the two domains and, above all, between politics and religion and between the private and the public. A common trajectory of the prophetesses’ social and political life from public recognition to exclusion and private retreat gives a clue of a possible research path, highlighting the connections between religious and political actors. If prophecy’s source of legitimacy was its intrinsic public character, after its “golden years”, i.e. the early XVI century in Italy and the first half of XVII century in England, the public vein of prophecy becomes a major factor of condemnation (Niccoli 1987).

While in the periods analysed religion is the first and foremost field of women’s action and voice in public, it is also arguably the first aspect to be reformed, namely to be sanitized and cleansed from women’s presence, when women spin out of control: the very fact that a new subject is entitled to speak by God himself unleashes subversive egalitarian consequences that need to be prevented and hidden into the private realm. In this way, an attempt of disciplining unruly women, and those who surrounded and supported them, is put into practice. A double axis of difference is in play: the religious one – as prophetesses are usually affiliated to sects or unorthodox religious movements – and the sexual one. Sexual

difference, in relation with gender as a useful category of historical analysis (Scott 1986), can be deemed as an original difference, structuring prophetesses' voice and relationship with the former secular and temporal actors, not to say with God.

The trajectory of female prophesying deals also with women's struggle for liberty, highlighting the dialectics between political order and disorder. Moreover, female prophesying hints at the rise and fall of women's influence on State and Church. As a result, looking at prophecy from women's point of view and in a comparative perspective offers the opportunity of shedding some light on hidden paths of female subjectivation before the rise of feminism. As a matter of fact, the religious field, that constitutes a highly complex symbolic representation of society, is where the deepest reasons of women's role in Western world should be found (Scaraffia, Zarri 1994).

Taking up the challenge of studying female prophecy in the early modern era means, furthermore, to have a more complete picture of the religious and political unrest around the years of Protestant Reformation, because, as Mack observed, "the combination of her despised status and her ecstatic, yet authoritative behavior, made the female prophet a perfect symbol of a world turned upside down". As a powerful representation of the unfillable gap between *potestas* and *auctoritas*, female prophecy questioned the hierarchies that constitute both the religious and the political realm. Therefore, the Weberian category of charismatic power shall be reframed in order to take into account the relations between men and women. In this sense, the existence of political linkages between prophetesses and political actors shall be verified, in order to defy the idea of a condition of mere subordination of women inside a patriarchal frame. These linkages between political actors and prophetesses are yet to be fully reconstructed, necessarily calling into question the problem of authority: does prophecy give authority and to whom (prophetess, patronizing king and queen, spiritual father, revolutionary leader, audience)? The changing political status of prophecy says something not only about those who were recognized as prophets, but also about all the actors who supported, dismissed, or censured prophecy.

Structure of the research

The research project is structured on two historical-conceptual cores, i.e. the long Counter-Reformation process in Italy and its origins (1500-1564) and the Revolutionary period in England (1640-1688). For each historical-conceptual core the life and works of a

few significant prophetesses will be singled out as case studies. In Italy the experience of Chiara Bugni, Angela Merici, and Antonia Paola Negri will be considered as particularly representative of the different faces of and attitudes towards female prophesying.

Chiara Bugni (1471-1514), who defined the nun as a soldier of Christ, in a metaphor of spiritual life as a battle, took the orders at the monastery of San Sepolcro in Venice and lived hidden for fifteen years until her confessor made her mystical gifts public. Her prophetic charisma attracted huge masses until the excessive turmoil surrounding her made a Franciscan monk visit the monastery and command her to silence and monastic imprisonment. Angela Merici (1474-1540) was the founder of St. Ursula company, a confraternity for middle and lower rank women who could not take the holy vows. The company's rules provided for communal monastic life without the requisite of seclusion, in line with the ideal of the primitive church. She wrote two works, transcribed by her secretary, on the education of girls and widows. Antonia Paola Negri (1508-1555), author of *Spiritual Letters*, was the head of the company of Angelical nuns and was recognized as an absolute spiritual authority. Ecclesiastical and lay men, governors and common people referred to her as to an oracle, until in 1551 the Venetian Council of Ten expelled her from her congregation, contesting her primacy over the priests.

With regard to England, the cases of Eleanor Davies, Margaret Fell, and the Fifth Monarchist Anna Trapnel will be examined, since their cases became quite popular and symbolize the historical course of religious dissent and political resistance. Eleanor Davies (1590-1652), of noble birth, was a learned pamphleteer and prophetess, who predicted the death of the duke of Buckingham. After "the spirit of prophesy" fell upon her, as she states in her writings, she was called at court by the queen but her fortune did not last long. In 1633 she was tried for interpreting the Scriptures, for being a false prophetess, and for illegal printing and subsequently she was put in jail. Margaret Fell (1614-1702) founded the Society of Friends together with George Fox, her second husband. In the early stage of their development, Quaker congregations had a primary role in fostering women's voice in the form of preaching and prophesying in public, as Fell herself does in *Womens Speaking Justified*. After the Restoration, she was sentenced to life imprisonment and forfeiture of her property. Finally, the case of Anna Trapnel (ca. 1622-ca.1680) will be considered. She was a much famed prophetess, known for her dreams and visions, as Thomas Hobbes observed in *Behemoth*. Almost no biographical information is available, apart from a few remarkable episodes of her life. In 1654 she installed herself in a room in Whitehall, where she stayed for

12 days without eating, while a large crowd watched her singing and prophesying for the release of Vavasor Powell, Fifth Monarchist and anti-Cromwellian minister. Her later prophesies were increasingly critical of Cromwell and his regime and caused her to be persecuted and imprisoned. Starting from the life and works of the above-mentioned prophetesses, the research will be carried out along four key questions.

The **first question** is whether prophecy can be read as a part of a wider strategy of self-legitimation conducted by women in a world where they were not able to speak as theologians, priests, pastors nor historians. Can female prophecy be understood as a conscious defence against an unequal regime that put women in the condition of silent subjects and silent disciples? Is it something that produces long-term consequences on women's condition? Some scholars (Wiseman 1992, Hinds 1996) argue that, in the long run, their authority based on an ecstatic, visionary impulse ended up confirming women's irrationality, while paradoxically reinforcing the sexual inequality they defied and sanctioning women's exclusion from the political realm. Like animals, masterless men, rebels and witches, prophets who do not build their language according to scientific criteria shall be excluded from the linguistic and political community, as theorized in the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, insofar as both communities have the task to control the arbitrariness that is implicit in the individual and passionate language. What if, instead, the experience accumulated by prophetesses and women preachers in the public sphere was the premise for a female agency not limited to religious vocation but rather expanding into the fields of science, philosophy, education and historiography? De Certeau (1982) maintained that female experience succeeded better in resisting to the fall of sets of theological and masculine symbols. In this perspective, rather than a simple disappearance of prophecy in the second half of the XVI century in Italy and at the turn of the XVII century in England, a radical transformation of prophesying might have occurred.

The **second question** is about the causes of prophetesses' and women saints' marginalization that occurred after the Counter-Reformation in Italy and after the Glorious Revolution in England. Does the abovementioned marginalization respond more to the need of chasing prophetic speaking from the political sphere or else to the will of re-disciplining *female* subjectivity, of suppressing women's *charisma* (Malena 2003)? In the case of women, at stake there is the threat they pose to political order not only as prophets but also as *women*: prophecies that announce the overturning of historical course present deeply subversive

connotations (Koselleck 1979; Miegge 1992) and must be silenced, even more when at stake there is the maintenance of sexual order.

A **third question** concerns whether women's marginalization responded to the new political and religious imperatives of women's confinement into the private sphere, both in Reformed and Catholic countries. It is not by chance that the last vestiges of prophecies concerned private and personal facts instead of political and public issues. Segregated life in the cloister – virtually characterized by the more complete chastity for Catholic nuns and tertiaries – might be equated to the imperative of family unity (Zarri 1990, 1994) in the Protestant countries. As a consequence, public faith becomes a private fact, while every Protestant household becomes a cult venue, with the *paterfamilias* assuming the role of moral guide (Stone 1977) – but the same counts even when this role is taken on by the mother. When the revolutionary process came to a halt after the Glorious Revolution, the spaces for women's agency and autonomous intervention in the political debate shrank. In the Catholic countries, the Counter-Reformation institutionalized seclusion as the proper way of life for godly women. Monastic *clausura* in Italy, becoming a duty of all kinds of nuns and tertiaries (Cretyens 1965) after the Council of Trent (1530-1564), coincides with the private retreat of ecstatic visionaries and prophets of nonconformist congregations in England (Mack 1982). Pushing female religiosity into the private realm seems to be a fundamental trait of the attempt of re-disciplining women after a moment of profound social, political and religious change that affected the relationships between the sexes. The expulsion from the public sphere of city and town squares and streets represents the effort of confining women in a visible manner, stealing their public image all at once. Seclusion is thus a metaphor of the new political and sexual order. Apparently, then, women's seclusion or retreat into the private realm were fostered by spiritual and political authorities in both worlds, foreshadowing the public/private dichotomy that constitutes one of the main tenets of modern patriarchal order.

A **fourth question** relates to prophesying as a charismatic activity that entangles religion, politics and history making. The age between the Protestant Reformation and the Seventeenth century constitutes the first phase of a dialectics between prophecy and history (Koselleck 1979), under the development of historical curiosity and desire to unveil the future and to understand the past in the light of eternity. Prophets are thus central subjects for the understanding of modern history, as modernity can be conceived as born in the struggle between those who claimed authority from the past and the tradition, and those who asserted their power on the base of the promise of the future. Becoming an ideological weapon,

prophecy is a precise way by which new subjects can enter into the political field. The XVI and XVII developments of female prophesying represent a means to understand the rise of political modernity as the result of a battle fought by antagonistic while complementary forces: history and prophecy, political and religious power, religion and secularization. To bring women back in means to introduce an element of disorder in the analysis of the mutual influence between prophesying and history making.

Comparing the Italian and the English cases

With respect to the opportunity of comparing such different contexts as the English and the Italian one a few remarks are necessary. Surely, until now not enough research has been done in order to reconstruct the impact of prophecies on society and political actors, due to the differentiation of the religious systems after the Reformation. Nevertheless, some similarities can be found that show a deep affinity between Rome and London, even after the Reformation and its insubordination against priests and bishops: in the Reformed Church as well as in the Catholic one the Gospel continued to dictate the holy need of hierarchy and order as appropriate attributes of nature and human society. These similarities are profoundly relevant in reconstructing the concept of female prophecy and should be taken into account when considering a comparison of the phenomenon of prophetesses.

First of all, the prophetesses in both countries are part of a larger movement for the renewal of Church and religion, contesting traditional ecclesiastical hierarchies and rituals, even though the English revolution offers a unique chance of prophetesses' public visibility that is not conceivable in Italy to the same degree. In this movement, thanks to their mystic-charismatic power – based on special divine gifts, a direct link with God and an immediate access to the super-natural – women prophets find a privileged position from where to make their voice heard and their authority respected, both in the Roman Church and in nonconformist sects.

Second, Italian living saints and English godly women who own the prophetic virtue seem to be assigned the role of moral educators who are the responsible for the spiritual health of the local community, that can be the monastery, the congregation, the court, the city. This “divine motherhood” (Prosperi 1986) or “spiritual motherhood” (Zarri 2004), far from just reproducing a model of woman as mother and wife, allowed prophetesses to gain some shares of social recognition.

Third, there seems to be in both contexts a continuous struggle between the socially imposed need of male mediation on prophetic activity and women's effort to impose themselves autonomously in the religious and public sphere, also due to the increasing individualization of religiosity. Some prophetesses were illiterate and needed male secretaries, or confessors, to transcribe their visions, although others could read the Bible and preach, gaining a warm audience. In any case, to be a woman and therefore a marginal subject was depicted by the prophetess as the sign of the exceptionality of the divine intervention, and as a means of self-legitimation in front of the spiritual or political community.

Fourth, a similar path of rise and fall of prophetesses' status can be identified, from an early stage of collaboration or co-implication with power detainers, to the attempt of marginalizing anomalous forms of religious expression and expelling them from the political realm. This translated into a double dynamics of institutionalization or criminalization of prophecy, both affecting the perception of women's religious and political role: the transition from a reputation of godliness to accusations of witchcraft and trials for pretended or "affected sanctity" does not concern the act but the actor (Thomas 1971; Craveri 1980). This transition could be linked with the need of disciplining women, as it becomes clear looking at the practice of confessors in Italy, who were agents of mediation and softening of the disruptive potential of the prophecies (Prosperi 1986, Niccoli 1998). On the one hand, women must be restored to their proper place, the household or the closed convent; on the other hand, prophetic inspiration, that was one of the main constitutive elements of sanctity, shall be recast as a disturbing anomaly. Consequently, the space of women's critique of and influence on the political and religious institutions seems to close at the beginning of modern era, when prophecy is substituted by utopia and the revolutionary project in the State, and by a-historical millenarisms, mystic vision and new models of sanctity in the Church (Cacciari - Prodi 2016).

Methodology

An interdisciplinary approach will be adopted, intersecting the history of political thought, declined specifically according to the guidelines of the German *Begriffsgeschichte* theorized by Koselleck, Brunner and Conze, with the history of religion and feminist political theory. Methodologically, this research proposal responds to the discussion of the status of female prophecy in two geographical contexts – Italy and England – in two different periods –

XVI and XVII centuries – focusing on two historical-conceptual cores. The first one is the Counter-Reformation process in Italy (1530-1564), going back to its roots and looking at the heretical turmoil of the first three decades of XVI century. The second one is the revolutionary period in England, intended as a long process starting with the years preceding the *great rebellion* of the 1640s and terminating with the constitutional change initiated during the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

The research proposal also responds to the investigation of the production of prophetic texts and historical narratives. It is not a project broadly concerning forms of female spirituality or individual cases of exceptional devotion (Bainton 1971, 1973), but it is rather focused on a specific expression of women's religious oral and written practice that is prophesying. As a first step, I will reconstruct the historical political and religious context, taking into account the problem of sexual difference in order to define the historical-political concept of prophecy and trying to identify a conceptual constellation that helps to nail down female prophecy. In the following phase, an in-depth philological examination of different kinds of manuscript and printed sources will be made, carrying out a double comparison: between Italy and England and between early modern historiographical and religious texts. Thus, original and modernized editions of prophecies and visions, prophetesses' autobiographies, sermons, spiritual diaries, together with conduct books, Inquisition's records, contemporary historical reconstructions and city's chronicles will be scrutinized.

Preliminary Studies

My interest in prophecy originates from my previous PhD research, that focused on the life and work of Mary Astell (1666-1731), an English philosopher, theologian and political thinker. The dissertation reconstructs the political and religious context of “the world upside down” of Seventeenth century England, identifying a broad landscape of remarkable women – preachers, petitioners and prophetesses – who broke into the newly born public sphere. As a troublesome and sometimes unwelcome presence, these women imposed themselves in the political and religious debate, thanks to the availability of a non-rationalist discursive mode. The struggle between orthodoxy – whose definition varied according to the speaker – and dissent, between godly people and worldly people, between Church and sects, left an open space where new actors, or better actresses, could take to the stage. The chance of speaking with one's own voice in a newly formed – or developing – public sphere is also the

background of the diffusion of prophecy, something that makes clear that religion could be thought of as the first and primary place of women's independent voice and action. In this framework, female prophets such as Margaret Fell, Anna Trapnel and Eleanor Davies could achieve an unexpected influence on both sectarians – particularly from the lower classes – and political leaders. Female prophets' breaking into the public sphere turned into a thorny issue in terms of the continuous defiance to traditional hierarchies that pervaded society, i.e. those based on sexual difference. Therefore, the experience of prophetesses was an outstanding example of the challenge to sexual and social barriers posed on the participation of normally excluded subjects, a challenge, then, to inequality itself. When the era of the English revolutions came to a halt and a new order was established, the condition of women underwent a dramatic change. The attempt to shape the modern State as a neutral field meant that women's subjectivity should be subjugated, constrained and confined in the domestic realm. The category of female prophecy seems to be a promising tool to understand women's political role in defying inequality also in the Italian Counter-Reformation context, as well as to explain their private retreat.

Expected outcome

The expected outcome is to understand the implications of female prophetic activity on early modern European political history, questioning the model of the rational, masculine individual. By illuminating the linkages between political and religious institutions, political actors, historians and female prophets, it will be possible to understand if and how women, as alleged non-subjects, disestablish the conventional societal hierarchies and question social order, therefore intervening in the making of an alternative vision of present, past and future.