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*Women's Prophetic Writings in Seventeenth-Century Britain* by  
Carrie Font (review)

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These are details worth noting but do not detract from the value of this work. The words and the points of view of women from the merchant and professional classes in the early modern period are rare in any language. These lively translations give us access to three interestingly contrasting women's voices. The work is an important resource for teaching and research in literature, history, and women's and gender studies.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For the source text of *Pitiful and Macabre Regrets* by Marguerite d'Auge, see "Les pitoyables et funestes regrets de Marguerite d'Auge," in *Remonstrances, prophéties et confessions de femmes (1575-1650)* [Women's remonstrances, prophecies and confessions, 1575-1650], ed. Jean-Philippe Beaulieu (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014), 138-54. For *Memoirs Concerning Her Father's Family* by Renée Burlamacchi and *The Genealogy of the du Laurens* by Jeanne du Laurens, see "Mémoires de Dam<sup>le</sup> Renée Burlamacchi concernant la famille de son père" and "Généalogie de Messieurs du Laurens," in *Les Femmes et l'histoire familiale (XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle)* [Women and family history, 16th-17th century], ed. Susan Broomhall and Colette H. Winn (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008), 97-106, 139-71.

*WOMEN'S PROPHETIC WRITINGS IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN*, by Carme Font. Routledge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2017. 250 pp. \$149.95 cloth; \$49.46 ebook.

Carme Font joins a cohort of scholars who have discovered creativity, intellect, and beauty in the prophetic discourse of seventeenth-century women. Despite the bodily suffering and self-abnegating authorial strategies often associated with this genre, Font's study helps to celebrate the highly personalized and empowering nature of early modern prophecy. In *Women's Prophetic Writings in Seventeenth-Century Britain*, Font illuminates the ways in which women became leaders of communities and activists for political and social change through their prophetic writing.

Font demonstrates the empowering and personalized nature of seventeenth-century prophecy through the example of the Baptist Anne Wentworth (1629/30-1693?). In Wentworth's prophetic writing, her biblical imagery and doom-laden predictions also reference and condemn her own violent and abusive husband. Font observes that for women such as Wentworth the prophetic mode facilitated "the articulation of personal convictions as spiritual beliefs" (p. 214). This form of discourse allowed

women to produce authoritative texts that were shaped by their own experiences and that often “transformed their personal circumstances” (p. 214).

Font also argues that seventeenth-century women used their prophetic voices to intervene and influence the politics and society around them. In another compelling case study, Font discusses the Baptist Elizabeth Poole (bap. 1622?-1688?), who was invited to deliver her prophecies to the army council in December 1648. Poole’s speech was printed under the title *A Vision* in 1649. Addressing the heart of power, Poole reported a divine vision of “a man” (signifying the army) assisting “*a woman crooked, sick, weak and imperfect in body*” (signifying the nation) (qtd. p. 65). Poole explained that this vision was an expression of God’s specific desire that the army should aid the ailing nation by preserving the body of King Charles I after his trial. With her anti-regicidal interpretation, Poole clearly endeavoured to intervene in the pressing political matters of the day with her prophetic discourse. In her analysis of Poole’s writing, Font goes so far as to suggest that “the main motivation” for Poole’s text was in fact “political,” and that Poole’s references to prophetic visions stemmed from a need to “build a public *persona* fit for the occasion” (pp. 76, 86). As such, Font argues that Poole’s passionate political discourse predominates her visionary material, which the critic describes as “brief, almost subdued” (p. 86).

As illustrated by her discussion of Poole, Font is often less invested in examining the spiritual and theological arguments within women’s prophetic discourse. Instead, Font’s analyses frequently favor emphasizing the personal and political motivations of women adopting a prophetic mode. While duly acknowledging that religious and political matters were closely intertwined during this period, Font also argues that seventeenth-century prophecy could work as “a form of activism because social or political regeneration, and not religious conversion, was the primary concern of prophetesses” (p. 42). Indeed, what Font is often most interested in celebrating in her work is the way in which “women’s prophetic narrative created an authorial center capable of confronting political adversaries, subverting institutional control, or dignifying the social status of women” (p. 217). Thus, according to Font, “to read prophecy as an adjunct of a religious discourse only is to deny its full discursive capability” (p. 217).

One of the greatest contributions *Women’s Prophetic Writings* makes to the study of early modern women’s writing is the careful way in which Font nuances our understanding of the term “prophetic.” As this volume’s abundant source material illustrates, not all seventeenth-century prophecy resembled an inspired trance. As Font states, “women’s prophetic speech in seventeenth-century Britain displayed a combination of ecstatic, exegetic, and autobiographical elements” that “could vary according to the prophetic personality of the individual” (p. 97). Accordingly, Font glosses a

broad spectrum of works in which women might be described as adopting a prophetic mode. The variety of texts discussed includes the eccentric, ecstatic tracts of the noblewoman Lady Eleanor Davies; the catechisms of Dorothy Burch, a mother from Kent; the controlled, intellectual writings of Elizabeth Avery and Elizabeth Warren (that “seem to be closer to sermon and exegesis than revelation and performance,” p. 48); and the co-authored autobiographical writings of the Quaker missionaries Katherine Evans and Sarah Cheevers.

At times, I felt Font’s wide-ranging exploration of seventeenth-century prophecy might have been communicated a little more clearly. In particular, the division of material into three sections, containing chapters of varying length, sometimes felt under explained. Nevertheless, the author’s tireless commitment to providing a broad and contextualized view of her subject serves as an important reminder of the scope, diversity, and creativity of early modern women’s writing. Font’s work is an enthusiastic and thought-provoking contribution to the study of seventeenth-century literature, and it helps to highlight a complex genre ripe for further investigation.

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*QUESTIONING NATURE: BRITISH WOMEN’S SCIENTIFIC WRITING AND LITERARY ORIGINALITY, 1750-1830*, by Melissa Bailes. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017. 272 pp. \$45.00 cloth; \$45.00 ebook.

Melissa Bailes’s much-needed study of the originality of Romantic women’s scientific verse, *Questioning Nature: British Women’s Scientific Writing and Literary Originality, 1750-1830*, fills a gap in existing scholarship on the era, women’s writing of the time, and the dynamic hybridity of literary-scientific productions. Beginning with a tightly argued introduction, which establishes dominant male discourses and histories as well as often-overlooked counternarratives emphasizing the role of men and women alike in constructing a complicated and innovative intertextual culture, Bailes clearly articulates the sociological and literary implications of naturalists’ methods and conclusions during the Romantic era. She often eschews easy and familiar references, such as to Erasmus Darwin’s botanical poetry or Anglican clergymen’s natural historical pursuits, for the sake of developing a more focused and distinctive intellectual history of influence and debates. She returns to Darwin at a later point in her argument, when she can situate his work in a more distinct context and develop her ideas about his relevance in greater depth. Bailes consistently