

**“A SMALL BEER AND TOAST”:  
STREET POLITICS AND PROPHETIC PERFORMANCE  
IN ANNA TRAPNEL’S *THE CRY OF A STONE* (1654)**

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This paper focuses on the rhetorical and para-rhetorical strategies of communication used by one of the most well-known women prophets of pre-Restoration England: Anna Trapnel. Through the commentary of her work *The Cry of a Stone* (1654), attention is paid to modes of expression which assist the verbal utterance and transcend it, namely: bodily movement and the dynamics of group communication in the urban landscape of London. These elements shape a ‘gestural politics’ which is characteristic of Trapnel’s style, becoming inseparable from her message.

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The young maiden Anna Trapnel (fl. 1642-1660) was already a respected member of the Fifth Monarchists when, at the beginning of January 1653, she came suddenly into the public eye. For eleven or twelve days she attracted a large audience of followers and onlookers who listened to the songs, recitations and prayers that constituted the bulk of her prophetic speech uttered in a small inn near Whitehall. She did not eat nor drink except for a “small toast and beer”. Some members of the audience reported bits and pieces of this experience, most notably the sympathetic ‘Relator’ who wrote down most of Trapnel’s speech. Marchamont Needham, a journalist and government supporter who wrote to Cromwell on 7 February 1654, was also a witness to Trapnel’s trance:

There is a two-fold design about the prophetess Hannah; one to print her discourses and hymns which are desperate against your person, family, children, friends and the government; the other two send her all over England, to proclaim them *viva voce*. She is much visited, and does a world of mischief in London, and will do in the country. The vulgar dote on vain prophecies. I saw hers in the hands of a man who was in the room when she uttered them day by day in her trance, as they call it. He promised to lend me them; if he does, I will show you them. They would make 15 or 15 sheets in print. (*Calendar of State Papers*: 7 February 1654)

Needham’s remarks may be seen as derogatory of Trapnel’s speech, but are nevertheless indicative of her public influence among Londoners and, more importantly, are privy to their specific weight in London’s public opinion, since they could be printed and circulated in the hectic religious and political atmosphere of revolutionary England. Trapnel caused a commotion during her two-week confinement and attracted the attention of dismissed members of the Nominated Assembly, ordinary Londoners and journalists, some of them favourable to radical sectarian viewpoints. However,

Needham’s commentary suggests that the moves of Trapnel’s congregation were perceived as a plausible threat to government stability. This concern about the disruptive effect of Anna Trapnel’s activities within the public arena points at an early consciousness of the effects of having women addressing the masses in public locations.

Analysing Anna Trapnel’s case through the lenses of this theoretical standpoint suggests that she is using her authority as a prophet to both enliven and use a public platform which is in the making: Anna’s denunciations and her call to subvert the political establishment are creating the very platform which holds the key to challenge authority: rather than the material content of her political messages, what makes her an able London prophetess is her ubiquity and appropriation of a public space. Her rhetoric, body language and strategies of group communication were geared towards reinforcing her presence (and therefore her message) in the public eye. David Zaret suggests that the relationship between the formation of modern public opinion and politics bears intimate links with initiatives in a more popular social milieu than in the literate culture, since the public sphere appears to have been larger and stronger in the last half of the seventeenth century. For him as much as for Jürgen Habermas, religious ideals, however powerful and tuned in to modern ideals of democracy and equality, are not enough by themselves to effect political change; but they can be stepping stones to access a public platform from which to effect change, political or otherwise:

It thus seems unlikely that the relevance of religious developments for the subsequent rise of a public sphere in politics lies in a simple transformation of religious ideas on spiritual equality into democratic models of political life. Rather, this relevance can be found in the creation of a public sphere in religious life that initially legitimated the reasonableness of public opinion as a forum and arbiter for criticism and debate. (Zaret 1992:220)

There is then no doubt that Anna Trapnel’s irruption at Whitehall, a centre of political power as much as of theatrical display with its ‘masquing hall’, bore significant symbolic innuendos which served the purpose of justifying the appropriation and use of a public space. In a very real sense, her Whitehall prophecy marked a climatic moment in Anna’s prophetic career and popularity.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of January 1654, while accompanying fellow Fifth Monarchist member Vavasor Powell, ‘preacher of the gospel in Wales’, to an examination at Whitehall, she fell into a twelve-day trance. According to the Relator or amanuensis of her public speech, which was reported in both *The Cry of a Stone* and in *Strange and Wonderful News from Whitehall* (1654) printed by Robert Sele, Anna lay in bed with “her eyes shut, her hands fixed” (1654a:2) and delivered a collection of visions in verse about the coming Kingdom of Christ together with a denunciation of Cromwell for his “great pomp and revenue, while the poor are ready to starve” (1654a:50). During her long trance, she was visited by some notables. The gist of her long prophecy revolves around the question of what is to become of England, God’s chosen nation, since Cromwell has betrayed the revolutionary and republican cause by taking on the office of Lord Protector. She warns Cromwell and the nation based on the authority granted by Trapnel’s appropriation of her readings of biblical texts, particularly the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, trying to convince her audience of the divine origin of these pronouncements.

Since her attacks on Cromwell were at this point comparatively more discreet than in her future prophetic speeches, no action was taken against Trapnel until her congregation sent her on a preaching mission to Cornwall. Her activities in the west called the attention of the clergy and the government; she was arrested on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of

March, imprisoned in Plymouth, transferred to Portsmouth, and then to Bridewell before being released on July 26. These experiences were set forth in two tracts, *Legacy for Saints* and *Anna Trapnel’s Report and Plea*, in which she insists once again on Fifth Monarchist millenarianism:

Who can forbear taking up a Lamentation concerning poor ENGLAND; whole prophets prophesie falsly, and the priests bear rule by their means, and the people love to have it so; but what will they do in the end thereof; for sure the end will be sad, when the Lord shall come out as a Swift Witness against the Seers of ENGLAND, for strengthening *Baal’s* Priests, and upholding the Popes dominion, and dressing the Scarlet Whore in new clothes so as to blinde and decieve cities and countries. (ATRP 1654:4)

Towards the end of 1655, Anna Trapnel made a second trip to Cornwall in order to visit the imprisoned Fifth Monarchist member, John Carew. She was summoned before the Justice of Peace, but was unable to appear because she fell into another trance. She could escape arrest this time, but she could not complete her negotiation mission to free Carew, and considered the possibility of migrating to America. Trapnel suffered another disappointment during this time (December 1656-May 1657) since a split occurred within Simpson’s church due to internal feuds about Fifth Monarchist’s leaderships and their recourse to violence to gain political influence.

Anna Trapnel’s renown in the 17<sup>th</sup> century can be seen as the result of a Fifth Monarchist publication campaign, in the wake of her dramatic prophetic speech at Whitehall and her trip to Cornwall after her trance. It was the visual aspect as much as the rhetorical qualities of her protest, the sight of her seemingly faint body confined to a bed placed in a tavern, which caught the attention of her contemporaries. According to the accounts and records in *Severall Proceedings of State Affaires*, vol. 225, witnesses of all walks of life pored over every aspect of Trapnel’s spectacle, recording the patterns of her breathing, the number of times she tossed and turned, and observed all kinds of minute details about her appearance or the arrangement of her bedclothes. These props and the attention they commanded suggest a performance at work. Marcus Nevitt concedes that “the precise scrutiny given to the setting, Trapnel’s gestural vocabulary and the way in which she modulated her delivery in both poetry and prose suggest that seventeenth-century commentators regarded the occasion as supremely theatrical” (Nevitt 2006:10) and James Holstun reinforces this view by considering the incident as a “choreographed piece of political theatre through which Trapnel transforms the social space of tavern bedroom into a birthing room, parliament, meeting house and stage” (Holstun 1992: 142).

Modern commentators of Trapnel’s works seem to be divided in the relevance and centrality they impart to Anna’s use of rhetorical strategies on the one hand (almost to the exclusion of anything else) and a narrow focus on the dramatic and visual scenography on the other (also to the exclusion of other considerations). But in fact, the use of rhetorical strategies rich on biblical allusion on the part of Anna Trapnel is inseparable from their awareness of the importance of performative or gestural issues, precisely because their status as prophets allows them to appropriate a public location which is highly politically and religiously charged. James Holstun seems to concur on this view by considering that her prophetic message was not the clue to Trapnel grand entry into the revolutionary public space, but that it was “her symbolic action which invoked and transformed four sites of political and symbolic praxis: the household, the Parliament, the congregation and the theater” (Holstun 192: 144); Trapnel’s room in the

inn became a sort of politicised household were the private enters the public and the other way round.

Anna Trapnel’s protest in *The Cry of a Stone* and in the greater part of her whole written corpus is made up of a complex agency which structures her work. Although she was aware of the public arena, or at least willing to use it in order to speak out her ‘truth’, it is likewise certain that she often had difficulties in distinguishing her public activities from mere spectacle. Trapnel’s movement back and forth from the written word to the body show, and from her wish of anonymity to her use of public platforms, bears witness to the fact that she was aware of her influence as a prophetess and the means through which her divinely-inspired message operated on her audience. It must be noticed that she was a person who regretted the way in which her journey to Cornwall had transformed her into “a gazing stock for all the people”, for example. She also joined her London congregation to condemn the ways in which “all sorts of people” had turned her “a spectacle to the whole land”. These self-deprecatory statements can be partly understood as the result of a typical Puritan mistrust of theatrical display, coupled with a prophetic imperative according to which a divine message is always more relevant than its medium of production. Trapnel is explicit about her willingness to efface herself under the mantle of God: “I came not into the country to be seen ... I desired Christ and the beauty of holiness might be taken notice of, so that others might be taken with Christ; and that I might be onely a voyce, and Christ the sound” (ATRP 1654: 29).

Nevertheless, if in this quote Trapnel emphasises the auditory and verbal nature of her prophetic experience (as opposed to its visual and graphical qualities), she presents her famous Whitehall protest as an event with consequences reaching far beyond the moment of rhetorical utterance. In *The Cry of a Stone*, she is aware of the multiple and interwoven layers of modes of communication which facilitated her getting the message through to the audience. According to Marcus Nevitt, this realisation involves much more than an awareness that she was divinely inspired: “She demonstrates a sense of her own agency as being informed by the material (as well as verbal) dimensions of revolutionary pamphlet culture” (Nevitt 2006: 11). This self-awareness about the theatricality and performative nature of her message has been often overlooked. On the one hand, it is easy to dismiss it as irrelevant or accessory when compared to the vivid power of prophetic speech, which seems to suggest an incipient subjectivism and self-consciousness on the part of the speaker.

Through her performative strategies (including rhetorical speech, use of typology and body language), her dreams and visions and her empathy with the audience, Anna Trapnel reinforced her status as a prophetess as much as her position in a public platform she spoke to. Her gestures towards God are very often aware of the effect there are having on her audience, as if she was keeping an eye ‘above’ as she is keeping it ‘below’. This intersection between the divine, the personal and the public is nicely condensed in the very last lines of *The Cry of a Stone*, when the Relator explains the *grand finale* of Anna Trapnel’s trance, when she simply gets up from his bed in the tavern and, after some apparent bout of weakness, she goes out to the street, and walks a long distance from Whitehall to Hackney:

Herewith she closed, having layn in bed eleven dayes and twelve nights together; in all or most of which time her weakness of body was such, that after she had kept her bed the first two dayes and nights, being raised up while her bed was made, she was not able to go, but as she was carried in a Chair to the fire, and was ready to faint in the place, though they made hast to make her bed ready for her; notwithstanding this weakness, after she had kept her bed 11. dayes together,

without any sustenance at all for the first five dayes, and with onely a little toste in small beer once in 24 hours for the rest of the time, she rose up in the morning, and the same day travelled on foot from White-hall to Hackny, and back to Mark-Lane in London, in health and strength. (CoS 1654:79)

The reader can almost imagine Anna Trapnel walking those long distances at a good pace, chased after by a host of followers (we assume the Relator must have followed her), who are amazed at the nearly miraculous strength of a maiden who has been deprived of food and drink for a long time. There is no doubt that, as Feroli (2006), Hinds (2002) and other scholars point out, Trapnel’s instantaneous recovery acts for her audience as evidence that she had been divinely inspired, not ill, during her trance in the tavern, and that her “miraculous body figured centrally in the message itself” (Feroli 2006: 97). It is unquestionable as well that fasting and depriving the body from its basic biological functions can be read as a sign of religious authority, in keeping with standard prophetic and mystical tradition. But what seems to be original and remarkable in Anna Trapnel’s recovery of her trance is not only the fortitude of her body, but her willingness to walk the streets of London on her own feet and conquering, as it were, a larger public space that she has conquered in the tavern.

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