Conclusion

The similarity between the literary strategies these female prophets use to legitimise their writings is astounding. Even though they are seemingly worlds apart – due to their different upbringings, different backgrounds, different religious leanings, and the fact that some of them lived in different centuries, there is a consistency of topoi that unites them. They all face cultural restrictions portraying them as the weak sex that must be silent and remain inside the home. Writing and publishing is an endeavour that confronts several obstacles, all reflected in their texts. But instead of fighting against the negative stereotypes of them being weak, prone to illness, not fit for politics or writing, they use these and turn them into strengths and clever strategies for gaining authority for their writings precisely using these negative epithets.

Even though the scope of this study does not allow for a comprehensive investigation into all the female prophets of the Middle Ages or of the seventeenth century, a quick glance at medieval Continental visionaries shows that the themes of this study did not take place in a vacuum. Margery mentions several influential visionary writers in her *Book*. In the second half of the thirteenth century, for instance, a group of female mystics lived and wrote in the Benedictine monastery in Helfta, Saxony. We have visionary texts by Mechthild of Hackeborn (1240-98), Gertrud of Helfta (1256-1301) and Mechthild of Magdeburg (1207-1282), a beguine[1] who joined the convent in Helfta in 1270. The Prologue of Mechthild of Madgeburg's *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, which is written by Brother Heinrich, demonstrates the cultural prejudice surrounding female prophets:

1 "Beguines were women who chose to lead a life of voluntary poverty, chastity and religious devotion while remaining in the secular world. Unlike nuns, they did not take a vow of obedience" (Andersen 4-5).

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> Quite often, in fact, almighty God has chosen what is weak in the world to confound what is stronger for its good. Therefore, let no one wonder or, lacking trust, fall into disbelief if God in the time of grace renews his marvels. He, who in the time of the law of Moses mercifully saw fit to perform similar works, now reveals his mysteries to the fragile sex. Because the people of Israel believed Deborah's prophecy, they won freedom from oppression and victory over their enemies. (Prologue Brother Heinrich)

Brother Heinrich explains that even though the visions originate from a woman, they should not be dismissed. Mechthild may appear weak and fragile but scripture can help legitimise her claims. After all, in 1 Corinthians 1:27 we read: "But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty." God is known to choose the weak to confound the strong, so all doubt and disbelief in Mechthild should be suspended. Brother Heinrich also compares Mechthild to Moses and Deborah. He states that God chose Moses as a prophet and now he has chosen the "fragile sex" to reveal his mysteries. Furthermore, there are prophetesses in the Bible, such as Deborah, and Brother Heinrich highlights the benefits that the people of Israel received from believing in her. They were freed from oppression and able to withstand their enemies. Similarly, by believing in Mechthild, people stand to benefit greatly. The relation between individual weakness and the ability to prophesise is drawn by several of the women in this study. Trapnel, for instance, maintains that "the Son of God, who died, [...] gave himself for a weak hand-maid, as well as for a strong Paul" (*Report and Plea* "To the Reader"). Even though she is weak, inferior and unworthy (in her own words), she has the same status as Paul. As we also see in the Bible, God pours out his spirit upon the handmaids (Joel 2:28-29), using the weak rather than the strong.

This weakness is not only reflected in the faculties of the mind or the spirit, but is, of course, closely connected to the body. In many of the religious writings, the body is clearly subordinated to the mind and the spiritual. Augustine, for instance, claims that because man was created in the likeness of God "he has been set over all irrational creatures" ("Chapter XXXII" Book 13). In contrast, however, woman is made to obey man and is therefore linked to the irrational creatures man "has been set over." Augustine associates women with the body and appetite, and men with reason and the mind. Thus, women

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became closely connected to the body, which separates them from a spiritual life and God.

In the mystical experience, however, the body is of great importance. Mystics used Christ's humanity and his suffering on the cross as a gateway for contemplation. His body, as well as the mystics' bodies, took centre stage and formed the basis of the very intimate and personal connection between the mystics and God. However, male mystics, such as Hilton and Rolle, use this bodily experience only as a first step into contemplation and make it clear that the body needs to be left behind in order to reach higher levels of contemplation. In their eyes, the ultimate union with God can only be spiritual. Female visionaries, in contrast, not only use Christ's humanity as a gateway into contemplation, they generally also place stronger emphasis on the body than do their male counterparts. Julian, for instance, uses a bipartite soul system, just like Augustine and Hilton, and divides the soul into 'substance' and 'sensuality.' However, she clearly emphasises the importance of the 'sensuality,' which in her theology is based on kindness, mercy, and grace, and plays an important part in our salvation. She maintains: "I saw that in oure sensualyte God is" (*Showings* 85). Margery, on the other hand, goes above and beyond her contemporary mystics. She uses Rolle's imagery of the fire of love, which she locates more firmly in the bodily than he does. Margery also visualises the Passion scene and even participates. She literally takes over Mary's sorrow by crying, screaming, and running around and she even brings Christ's mother a hot drink in order to comfort her. The bodily experience is, thus, very much emphasised and both Julian and Margery use their weak bodies in order to gain authority.

Weakness is often used synonymously with illness. The notion that women are not fit for politics and fit to think or speak in public often stems from the idea that women are prone to illness. Many of these visionary writers use this concept to legitimise their status as prophets. For many of them, a severe, often almost fatal, illness marks their rite of passage as prophets. For instance, God warns Mechthild of Magdeburg, of an illness she will recover from: "Then our Lord said: 'You shall obey and trust me in these matters, and you shall also become sick for a long time, and I shall take care of you myself'" (Book IV, Chapter 2). This sickness marks the starting point of her visions and, therefore, has positive connotations. Likewise, both Trapnel and Julian are sick for three days and almost die when they are suddenly healed by God. Julian receives her sixteen revelations during her illness, and Trapnel lives in God's sight after hers, marking her as His prophet and instrument. The

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significance of the three days and nights connects the two women with the resurrection of Christ, and is a clear sign of their union, and their status as prophets. In the case of Mechthild of Hackeborn, it is the continuation of sickness during her whole life that reveals her to be a prophet. In the description of her visionary abilities, we read: "Moreover our gracious Lord so continually held His scourge over her, that almost constantly she suffered from pain of the head, and disease of the hair, and exceeding heat of the liver" (8).

Margery also begins her life as a prophet with an illness. However, her illness is clearly linked to childbirth, which, like the *imago dei,* is connected to Eve's transgression. Her punishment is pain in childbirth as well as to be subjected to her husband. But childbirth, even though connected to pain, suffering, and sickness, is not only a curse but also a form of redemption. In this sense, childbearing forms another parallel between women and Christ's suffering on the cross. Indeed, in several instances, Christ is portrayed as a mother who, in dying, is giving birth to a redeemed human race. As with Julian, in Mechthild of Magdeburg's visions there is also a clear analogy between the wounds of Christ and breastfeeding:

> Then both His wounds and her breast were open; the wounds poured, the breasts flowed, so that the Soul was revived and wholly restored when He poured the pure red wine into her red mouth. When the Soul was thus born out of the open wounds and became alive, then she was childlike and very young. (Book I, Chapter 22)

The soul is born out of the wounds of Christ and the milk of Mary's [2] breasts is given the same attributes as the precious blood of Christ. Breastfeeding becomes even more important in another statement: "When I thus became the Mother of many a homeless child, my breasts became full of the pure, undefiled milk of true, bountiful mercy, so that I suckled the prophets and the wise men before I was born. After that I suckled Jesus in my childhood" (Book I, Chapter 22). The suggestion here is that prophets and wise men become what they are through her milk. Christ's mother suckled Christianity, martyrs, apostles, and Jesus. Her milk becomes everything: "Lady, thus did you suckle then and suckle still the hearts of martyrs with strong faith, the

2 Interestingly, throughout this vision it is not clear if Mechthild is talking about her own or Mary's breasts. Thus, breastfeeding, and the implications made here, becomes an attribute belonging to all women.

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ears of confessors with holy protection the virgins with your chastity, widows with constancy, married people with kindness, and sinners with patient hope" (Book I, Chapter 22). In the end, her milk is God's word and, through breastfeeding, she feeds his instructions to everyone.

Several of the prayers and the texts written by women in the seventeenth century reflect the same connection between childbearing and Christ's suffering on the cross. The pain in childbirth is connected to Eve's transgression and must be suffered humbly. Women have to bear their cross: "All our paines therefore that we suffer in this behalfe, are none other thing, but a woorthie crosse laid upon us by thy godlie ordinance, to which with hart & mind I humblie submit my selfe" (Bentley 96). Death becomes another important part in these texts, which are rather graphic in describing women's pain in childbirth: "How long Lord shall [I] be racked asunder, and mine inward parts be thus greevouslie tormented for my sins" (Bentley 115). Bentley's prayers portray Christ's dying on the cross and, at the same time, tell of the all-too-real possibility of women dying during childbirth. Many of the texts by these women depict the same tension between anxiety, fear of dying and accepting their 'curse' humbly.

Yet, suffering in the name of Christ is an important part of the *imitatio Christi*. In Luke 6:22-23, we read: "Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake. Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven." Many of these women incorporate this notion of humble suffering within their texts as a way to legitimise themselves. Mechthild of Magdeburg, for instance, maintains: "Ah, dear Jesus, reward all those lovingly who have here poured out bitterness for me to drink, for they have made me rich in divine favors" (Book II, Chapter 24). The argument, here, is that the more these women are slandered or rebuked, the more divine favours they will obtain. Both Trapnel and Margery repeatedly stress their joy in suffering in the name of Christ. Trapnel states: "thus they spit forth venome against me; but it did me no hurt, because my Father made it work for good; my joy was not lessened, but increased" (*Report and Plea* 18). Meanwhile Margery claims: "For evyr the mor slawnder and repref that sche sufferyd, the mor sche incresyd in grace and devocyon" (44). The imitation of Christ and his suffering on the cross is another strategy used in these women's process to gain authority. Trapnel, for instance, clearly says that she is willing to take up the cross of Christ and suffer every day for him (*Report and Plea* 45), while Margery takes it even a step further by saying that the slander directed

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against her is a type of crucifixion. In the dialogue between her and Christ, they even switch roles (189). By imitating Christ, these women not only gain authority, they also render all slander and criticism against them invalid, and even increase their grace. Their voice, along with their behaviour, which can be very subversive, is thus legitimised.

These visionary writers are very much involved in politics as the second chapter shows. Even though the cultural restrictions of their time were aimed at preventing these women from talking in public or becoming involved in politics, they managed to write about their political opinions and about contemporary issues. The intimate bond between Christ and these women naturally meant that there was no need for the intermediation of a priest, a fact that was, in itself, political in the Middle Ages. For instance, even when Julian repeatedly states that she believes in the Church's teachings, she goes against several core doctrines. According to her theology there is no sin and no hell, thereby creating a universal salvation theory. In her vision of God and the servant, Adam is Christ and Christ is Adam, and she clearly sees that, although humans are not able to refrain from sinning, through Christ's sacrifice they are redeemed from original sin as well as from all future sin.

Additionally, both Margery and Julian share in the preoccupation with language and the vernacular contemporary to their time, prefaced also in Mechthild of Magdeburg's exclamation: "Now my German fails me; I do not know Latin. If there is something of merit here, it is not my doing" (Book II, Chapter 3). Questioning the ability of language to express the word of God has a long-standing tradition. Questioning how we can express something that is unspeakable has preoccupied scholars for a long time, the implication being that God's transcendence cannot be expressed in fallible human language. However, for a long time, Latin was the accepted language for talking about theological issues because it was the language of the learned. Mechthild's apology that she does not know Latin and her uncertainty about the merit of what she is writing, although it comes directly from God, opens the discussions on the appropriateness of the vernacular to talk about God. At one point, she talks about how surprised Master Heinrich was about many of the words she used in the book, stating that: "Indeed, ever since I, sinful woman, have been required to write, it has been a matter of great distress to me in my heart that I am able to describe this authentic knowledge and these holy sublime contemplations to no one except through these words. They seem to me, compared to eternal truth, all too feeble" (Book V, Chapter 12). Even though the words come from God, Mechthild is writing them down in her

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"feeble" language. It seems incredulous to her that the "authentic knowledge" she receives from God could be expressed in common language.

In England, at the end of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the fifteenth century, the use of the vernacular in religious matters became extremely controversial. The notion that religious ideas could be written in the vernacular for everyone to read and to understand was seen as dangerous and subversive. Indeed, Arundel's *Constitutions*, which were published in 1409, were a direct response to Lollardy, as well as to the use of the vernacular in religious texts. The *Constitutions* stipulated that no one was allowed to preach in English, translate scripture into English or discuss "any thing concerning the catholicke fayth, contrary to the determinations of the church" (Foxe, 1583 edition, Book 5, p. 549 (525)) in a classroom or in private. Furthermore, Arundel's prohibiting to "translate any text of the Scripture into English […] by way of a booke, libell, or treatise" (*Acts and Monuments* 1583 edition, Book 5, p. 549 (525)) expands the ban to all English texts that concern themselves with religious topics. But both Julian and Margery insisted on writing their texts for the unlearned and in Julian's words for "evyn Cristen." By writing in the vernacular their texts become subversive and political in their own right. In addition, Margery is acutely aware of her political surroundings, being accused of Lollardy several times in her *Book*. She is seen teaching, is accused of leading people astray with her talk and she is very mobile despite not being accompanied by her husband. This leads to her being questioned by several bishops and Archbishops about her subversive lifestyle.

The female visionary writers of the seventeenth century were equally, if not more, political in their writings. In the tumultuous period between the 1640s and the 1660s, many writers fought in writing for changes in both government and the Church. Katherine Chidley, for instance, writes both her *Justification* and *A New-Years-Gift* in answer to Thomas Edwards, a London preacher, who attacks numerous congregations in his writings. His *Gangraena*, in particular, is an 800-page catalogue listing all the failings of the different sects. Chidley's responses to Edwards align her with the Levellers, when she states, for instance, that "well-meaning Christians be the fittest on the earth to make Churches" (*Justification* 22) or when she puts forward the argument that no one has the right to rule over anybody else and that everybody is created equal. She also maintains that "Taylors, Felt-makers, Button-makers, Tent-makers, Shepherds, or Ploughmen" (*Justification* 23) should be able to become officers of the church without ordination and

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she argues that the current Church government does not act according to scripture, but is "vaine and Popish" (*Justification* 23).

Furthermore, she also responds to Edwards' fear that men will lose control over women if the independent churches gain control. His fear was that if anyone could become an officer of the church, women could also become preachers and men's domination over them would cease. Chidley is well aware of the cultural restrictions against women when she justifies her writing at the beginning of the *Justification*. She calls herself weak, and explains that even though she is not able to write like a man in a scholarly way, she has the authority of scripture and the "plaine truth" (*Justification* 2). Yet, her point-for-point rebuttal of Edwards' arguments convincingly demonstrates her writerly skill. She uses scripture, engages with Edward's arguments thoroughly, and also uses humour to disarm his inflated self-image.

Anna Trapnel uses her writings to participate in the political landscape as well. As part of the Fifth Monarchist movement, she reflects the hopes, disappointments, and political views held by many people of her time. In *The Cry of a Stone*, she paints the rise and fall of Cromwell, describing him first as a new Gideon, a great military leader that is appointed by God to defeat the Scots. She even foresees the dissolution of parliament several days before it happens, which was greeted with excitement by the Fifth Monarchists. Cromwell was depicted as a second Moses destined to lead God's people and help prepare for the kingdom of Christ on earth. But no sooner did he take the title of Lord Protector, the Fifth Monarchist felt betrayed and Trapnel refers to him as the fourth kingdom destroying the earth before Christ arrives to rule it. Trapnel's writings were so impactful that they were considered a serious political threat.

The third chapter has also further shown that these prophetesses are aware of the cultural restrictions imposed on women at the time. In concentrating on the production of texts as well as on authorship and the voice that these women claim for themselves, female visionary writers make writing and authorship topics in their own right in their texts. Mechthild of Magdeburg, for instance, more than once mentions her sinfulness and weakness. Like all the other prophetesses in this study, she calls herself a "sinful, lazy creature" (Book II, Chapter 7) and a "worthless vessel" (Book II, Chapter 24). Nevertheless, she is commanded by God to write her book, even though she is a woman. Indeed, the first words in her book are: "One Should Receive This Book Eagerly, For it Is God Himself Who Speaks the Words" (Book I). Here, she clearly tells the reader that the words are not her own, but God's.

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The following paragraph is worth quoting in full as it sums up the struggle that these women had in order to write and publish their books:

> I was warned against writing this book. People said: If one did not watch out, It could be burned. […] 'Because you are the one who told me to write it.' At once God revealed himself to my joyless soul, held this book in his right hand, and said: 'My dear One, do not be overly troubled. No one can burn the truth. […] The book is treefold and portrays me alone. The parchment that encloses it indicates my pure, white, just humanity that for your sake suffered death. The words symbolize my marvelous Godhead. It flows continuously Into your soul from my divine mouth. The sound of the words is a sign of my living spirit And through it achieves genuine truth.' […] 'Ah, Lord, if I were a learned religious man, And if you had performed this unique great miracle using him, You would receive everlasting honor for it. But how is one supposed to believe That you have built a golden house on filthy ooze' […] 'I always sought out the lowest, most insignificant, and most unknown place for them.' (Book II, Chapter 26)

The words are from God himself, and come from his mouth directly to Mechthild, who only writes them down. Moreover, the sound of the words symbolises the Holy Spirit, thereby making the whole book a trinity, which further substantiates the truth of everything that Mechthild writes. However, Mechthild is still worried about being chosen by God to write the book instead of a learned man. God's answer is that He has always used "the lowest, most insignificant" vessels for his truths. Mechthild, here, uses several topics that also feature in the texts of the other visionary writers in this study. As an unlearned woman, Julian, for instance, also calls attention to her being simple, while Margery, Trapnel and Wentworth are all, likewise, forced by God to write their books. God's use of the low and insignificant is also taken up by Trapnel who compares herself to a weak handmaid, evoking Joel 2:28-29 who states that God will use servants as well as handmaids to pour out his spirits. These women are, thus, made into prophets that must spread God's word to their fellow Christians.

The same holds true for Mechthild of Hackeborn. After her fellow nuns confess to having recorded her revelations, she is very sad and does not want the book to be published. Yet, God then tells her: "'All who search therein with faithfulness of heart, shall be made glad therein, and they who love Me shall grow more burning in My Love, and they who are sad shall find in it consola-

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tion'" (152-153). Similarly, in answer to Gertrud the Great's pleas that she does not have to publish her writings, God says:

> When I chose Jeremiah to be my prophet, he thought he was incapable of speaking with knowledge or discretion, yet by the words of his mouth I reproved peoples and kings. In the same way, my intention to clarify certain things through you by the light of knowledge and truth shall not be frustrated, for no one can hinder what has been predestined from eternity [...]. By virtue of my divinity, those who read this book for my glory with upright faith, humble devotion, and devout gratitude, seeking edification, will obtain remission of their venial sins, the grace of spiritual consolation, and, what is more, they will be made more receptive to grace. (48)

Through God, then, these women are able to reprove people and kings. No one is able to refute anything that they say as it is the truth and all their words come directly from God. Furthermore, anyone that reads their books will find consolation, faith, grace and even forgiveness for their sins.

The question of authority is further complicated by the involvement of scribes. Margery's *Book* involves three different scribes who clearly lack the skills to write down her story in a clear and structured way. These different voices and discourses affect the text and the scribes' own scepticism towards Margery raises questions surrounding her authenticity. Trapnel's scribe is not a completely reliable source either. He states that he has "a slow and imperfect hand" (*The Cry of a Stone* 2) and, on several occasions, he is not able to write down what Trapnel is saying, because of the many people in the room. At one point, he even reveals that he has altered the last words in Trapnel's song since he was not able to hear them clearly (*The Cry of a Stone* 45). Thus, the report is incomplete and, in parts, inaccurate. However, in both Margery's and Trapnel's cases, the scribes also act as witnesses and supporters. There is clearly a collaborative relationship between the scribes and the visionaries. Margery makes it clear that she does not want to add anything she cannot remember or is not the truth. The same holds true for Trapnel. The scribe's account is more immediate and adds another layer of authorisation. He believes in her and clearly portrays her as a true prophet and he is able to anticipate her opponents' accusations and refutes them before they are even able to voice them.

Contrary to all self-effacement and the insistence that they are only vessels and mouthpieces of the Creator, these prophetesses manage to gain the authority that is denied them. They are able to write and publish their books

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against all odds. They can voice their political inclinations, their feelings, hopes, and religious thinking. Once they have established their status as prophets, everything they say and do is legitimised by God. Margery's status as divinely inspired, for instance, is confirmed throughout the *Book*. She is shown as singularly loved by Christ and she is able to wish for anything that she wants from Him. She is able to choose her own confessor, promised to dance with the virgins in heaven despite having fourteen children, and is able to go on pilgrimages. She even bargains with Christ, trading her fasting for her chastity. Anna Trapnel, furthermore, travels the country not only spreading the word of God, but also defending her political thinking and opinions in the *Report and Plea*. She portrays herself as a true prophet who knows more than Nicodemus and is privy to God's secrets (*Report and Plea* 28.2). In addition, she makes clear that she is the one who decides what she tells the reader and what she keeps to herself. In Anne Wentworth's case, she not only shows herself to be a strong woman, she is also able to justify wanting to be separated from her husband. Even though her text is political and spreads the word of God, it is clearly also personal, talking about her and her husband in a very public setting. She ends her text "in full strength" (*True Account* 13), as she has learnt to argue and structure her texts through the whole process when her husband tried to destroy all of her writings. She refines her writing to a point where nobody can refute it anymore. All of these female visionary writers use the negative stereotypes directed at them, such as accusations of weakness and illness, to voice their concerns, beliefs, and autonomy in a very powerful way.

The similarities between these writers are astounding, especially as there is not much evidence that they were aware of one other. Even though Margery visited Julian, it does not mean that Margery was aware of her text. Alexandra Barrat, for instance, states: "there is no evidence that her text [...] circulated widely, if at all, in the Middle Ages. [...] [T]he earliest surviving complete manuscripts of [the Long Version] are as late as the seventeenth century" (241-42). Similarly, although there are brief descriptions of Margery's *Book* in the sixteenth century, her text was only rediscovered in the twentieth century and, thus, it is not clear whether it was known by seventeenth-century writers like Trapnel or Wentworth. Even though Mechthild's text was well known in England and was translated into Middle English (Barrat 245), there is no evidence that Margery or Julian knew her. Meanwhile, the female writers of the seventeenth century were probably not interested in these writers since they represented the Catholic faith most of them regarded as "vaine and Popish."

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Yet, they all faced similar cultural restrictions and negative stereotypes, and they all used them to overcome these restrictions and to legitimise themselves and their writings as a unifying feature across space and time.

In this study, I have focused on English visionary writers in the Middle Ages and the seventeenth century, and their respective cultural and historical contexts, and tried to give them enough space to make their voices heard. The scope of the study, however, has left several things unaddressed, which future studies could inspect further. The short glimpse into visionary writers from the Continent, such as Mechthild of Magdeburg, shows that there are parallels between these visionaries and the ones analysed in this study. The mystics on the Continent, some of them very well known, would without a doubt make a fruitful object for further inquiry. Catherine of Siena, for instance, a medieval mystic and one of the few women the Roman Catholic Church granted the doctor title ("Introduction" 1), sparked a wide variety of interest. Apart from her visionary writings, she wrote letters and prayers, and participated in the politics of her time.

However, even though there are clear similarities between Catherine and the female visionary writers in this study, there are also differences. There seems to be no evidence that Catherine used the called-to-write topos that is so prominent in other female visionary writings. Catherine wrote letters to popes and kings and does not seem to struggle with the fact that she is writing a book as a woman. She is clearly orthodox, even though she is fighting for a reformed church and plays an evident part in the politics of the day. She is very mobile and travels to Florence and Rome and speaks with popes, kings, cardinals and nobles. The similarities, but also the differences, between her and the other visionaries, thus, would be a fruitful way to expand the present study. There are also many more medieval visionaries on the Continent that deserve to be researched. These include Bridget of Sweden, who was married and had children, advised popes and kings, and was a representative of the 'mixed life' discussed in chapter one, or Elizabeth of Hungary, Marguerite Porete, and Hildegard of Bingen. All of these visionaries could prove to be fruitful avenues for future studies and could provide a more thorough answer to the apparent similarities of topoi between Britain and the Continent whilst also highlighting differences.

The same holds true for the seventeenth century. The scope of the study meant that many more writings by women from that period remained untouched. A quick glance at Sarah Wight serves as a case in point. We learn about Sarah Wight in the *Exceeding Riches of Grace Advanced by the Spirit of Grace,*

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in an Empty Nothing Creature. Her account and the eyewitness testimonials contain many of the topoi that have been examined in this study. For instance, Wight recounts her severe illness marked by deep despair, suicide attempts, blindness, and dumbness. During this period, she begins to quote from scripture. She is believed to be dying but then she is suddenly healed. Again, for a prophet, a severe illness healed by God is a rite of passage. In her suffering, Sarah also links herself to Christ: "I desired nothing but a crucified Christ, and I have him; a crucified Christ, a naked Christ […] I am sore all over; I can neither heare, nor see; I desired him so, and I have him so […] wee should be contented to beare the Crosse" (22). Just like the medieval mystics, she tells us that by having Christ and being Christ, her eyes become opened and her ears can hear again. Moreover, she portrays herself as an empty vessel and shows the above mentioned self-effacement: "What am I? a poor, empty, disconsolate, sinfull, vaine, contemptible worme, a poor, wretched, empty, unthankfull, sinfull, vile, contemptible worme, to tread upon" (22). Yet, just like the other visionary writers, Sarah is able to legitimise herself and her status as a prophet, demonstrated by the many testimonials and the published text itself.

Although the focus of this study is clearly on visionary writings, there are, of course, other genres and texts by women in the seventeenth century worth investigating, which could be contrasted with these visionary accounts. Margaret Cavendish, for instance, writes poems, an autobiography, books on philosophy and atomic theory, as well as love stories, plays, and letters. Even though she does not use the call-to-write topos to legitimise her writings, she comments on the subordination of women and the many restrictions they have to face throughout her works. In *Natures Pictures* she explains: "since all Heroick Actions, Publick Employments, as well Civil as Military, and Eloquent Pleadings, are deni'd my Sex in this Age, I may be excused for writing so much; for that is the Reason I have run, more busily than industriously, upon every Subject I can think of" ("The Preface"). She also tells the reader that women are kept like birds and that education is seldom available to them, and "by an opinion, which I hope is but an erronious one in men, we are shut out of all power, and Authority" (*Philosophical and Physical Opinions* "To the Two Universities"). Her anger over the exclusion of women in almost all areas is palpable as the paragraph continues. Contrasting different writings and genres could reveal different kinds of authorisation to produce a complementary picture of women's writings in the seventeenth century.

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Even though the scope of the present study has not allowed me to delve into a comparison of visionary writings with other genres, future studies could do well to devote more attention to how visionary writings of the Early Modern period relate to the concerns of early narrative texts. Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, for instance, is very much concerned with questions of authorisation and the telling of truth. *Oroonoko* begins with the following opening lines:

> I do not pretend, in giving you the history of this royal slave, to entertain my reader [...] There being enough reality to support it, and to render it diverting, without the addition of invention. [...] I was myself an eyewitness to a grat part of what you will find here set down, an what I could not be witness of, I received from the mouth of the chief actor in this history, the hero himself, who gave us the whole transactions of his youth; and though I shall omit for brevity's sake a thousand little accidents of his life, which, however pleasant to us, whre history was scarce and adventures very rare, yet might prove tedious and heavy to my reader. (2183)

Although the story comes not directly from "the hero," Behn insists on the truth of the events, as she has been an eyewitness to most of what she is going to recount. Similarly to the scribes of Margery Kempe and Anna Trapnel, Behn lends authority to a story, which otherwise could be seen as fictitious and untrue. Both scribes observe the visionaries and their behaviour and are thus able to give authenticity to the story they are writing down for the reader. The eyewitness report described at the beginning of *Oronooko* serves the same purpose. However, even though the emphasis is on a true account that relates everything without any addition, it is clear that we are not told everything. There are things that are "omit[ed] for brevity's sake a thousand little accidents of his life," in the same way that Anna Trapnel tells the whole truth, but decides what messages from God she keeps to herself.

Many of the early narratives that Ian Watt, for instance, describes in his influential *Rise of the Novel* are concerned with "the production of what purports to be an authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals" (27). As Barbara Foley states, this "pseudofactual imposture survived to the end of the century and beyond" (119). Also in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, for instance, the editor maintains that he "believes the thing to be a just history of fact; neither is there any appearance of fiction in it" ("The Preface"). Furthermore, he states that "the story is told with modesty, with seriousness, and with a religious application of events to the uses to which wise men always apply them to the instruction of others by this example, and to justify and

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honour the wisdom of Providence" ("The Preface"). As we have seen in these visionary writings, the text is written down as an example of God's will and glory for everyone to witness. Martin J. Greif thus maintains that "a fundamental purpose of Defoe's novel is to set forth and magnify the great grace, love, and compassion of God the Father to the greatest sinner, who through Jesus Christ returns by an unfeigned, sincere faith to Him" (552). Even though Crusoe has divided critics in reading the text either as a kind of conversion narrative or the emergence of capitalism and colonialism, or a mixture of both,[3] it seems clear that *Robinson Crusoe*, just like many other early novels, plays with the claims of authority similar to those used in visionary texts.[4]

Although many of the female visionary writers disappeared after the monarchy was restored that does not mean an investigation of the later centuries would not be promising. Barbara Straumann, for instance, shows that female characters in novels from the mid-nineteenth century onwards gain a public voice as singers, actresses, speakers or preachers. Furthermore, she argues that "nineteenth-century novels about female performers can be seen to link the voices of their figures to issues of feminine agency and to negotiate questions concerning the social, cultural and political role of women in this period" (1). Her discussion of George Eliot's novel *Adam Bede* and Margaret Fuller's essay *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* is very reminiscent of the issues raised in this study. Indeed, she maintains: "In Eliot's novel, the prophetic role empowers the Methodist preacher Dinah Morris to present herself as a passive vessel of a divine voice and, at the same time, speak with authority as she preaches the gospel and reprimands individual members of her congregation" (99). Dinah uses the same language as many of the visionary writers preceding her: "sometimes it seemed as if speech came to me without any will of my own, and words were given to me that came out as tears come, because our hearts are full and we can't help it" (qtd. in Straumann 111). Just as the other visionaries were called to write, Dinah

3 James O. Foster, for instance, claims that "Crusoe's story becomes one of the earliest fictional narratives in prose to present and explore the conflicts within a divided self that exists in a world where the inherited paradigms used to locate identity and to interpret experience are losing their explanatory adequacy" (183). Christopher Hill, for instance, states that "In many ways Robinson Crusoe, a book about life on a desert island, is a glorification of west European technology" ("Robinson Crusoe" 12).

4 "Documentation goes on the offensive in these texts, securing a terrain for the propositional value of fiction by decrying the mendacity of other discursive modes charged with the responsibility of telling an unmediated truth" (Foley 114).

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speaks without a will of her own. She speaks God's word and, thus, has his authority.

Moreover, Dinah also comments on the weakness of her body: "I felt a great movement in my soul and trembled as if I was shaken by a strong spirit entering into my weak body […] and I spoke the words that were given to me abundantly […] That was the beginning of my preaching […] and I've preached ever since" (qtd. in Straumann 112). Again, Dinah mentions that the words are given to her, rather than coming from herself. In addition, the weakness of her body makes it the perfect vessel and marks the beginning of her preaching. Dinah, here, uses the same language and the same negative epithets that the medieval and seventeenth-century visionary writers used, in order to present herself as a true prophet who has the authority to speak and write. However, in contrast to the other visionaries, she clearly states that she is preaching, which can be seen as a major shift. Most of the visionary writers discussed above were still very hesitant to call what they do preaching. Furthermore, Straumann's analysis of Fuller's essay shows this shift of confidence as well. She maintains: "Margaret Fuller […] does not need to be authorized by the voice of God because she finds a divine source within herself" (99). This short glimpse of the nineteenth century has shown that many of the same issues can be detected, but that there are also differences that are worth investigating.

Even though my focus has been on the historical context as well as the individual voices of the prophetesses, rather than on theoretical aspects of feminism, the study still contributes to it. The study raises issues of subjectivity, voice, and the struggle faced by women in a patriarchal society to write and find their public voice, a struggle that continued throughout the nineteenth century. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf again raises the same issues. Echoing the angry outburst of Margaret Cavendish discussed above, Woolf states: "I had earned a few pounds by addressing envelopes, reading to old ladies, making artificial flowers, teaching the alphabet to small children in a kindergarten. Such were the chief occupations that were open to women before 1918" (2111). Women were still excluded from most "Heroick Actions [and] Publick Employments" (Cavendish, *Natures Pictures* "The Preface") and "it is fairly evident that even in the nineteenth century a woman was not encouraged to be an artist" (Woolf 2120).

In addition, Woolf also states: "But what I find deplorable, I continued, looking about the bookshelves again, is that nothing is known about women before the eighteenth century" (2115). My aim with this work has been to fill in this historical gap, to give women a voice where they have traditionally been

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excluded from history books and from the literary canon. The present study contributes to the feminist approach of giving voice to lesser-known women and their texts, and shows that there were indeed texts by female authors before the eighteenth century. Even though the struggle of these women to write and to find a voice of their own is palpable, the study still shows that there is a proliferation of texts to investigate and that these women were able to legitimise their writings, their political participation, and their involvement in the public sphere. There is silence, along with silencing, but there are also some remarkable voices that indeed should still be heard today.

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