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Introduction

On November 24, 1707, thirteen year-old Mary Beer prophesied before a London crowd. In her admonition, she invoked a language of chosenness as she spoke in the voice of God:

> No Man can conceive my mighty Power, that shall be shewn by my Instruments, which I have already chosen, for my great and glorious Work. O rejoice, rejoice, you that now hear my Voice, chosen Vessels from me, to see the Glory of my Name to shine over the Nation of your Habitation, the Royal City, in which it shall first break forth. O Jerusalem, City of my Holiness! Tho it hath been long corrupted, now is the Day of its Purification.[1]

Beer, a member of a radical group known as the French Prophets, existed on the fringe of her society. She was not, however, unique in her choice of language. In the years between the British Civil Wars and the Great Awakening, we find myriad references to the belief that God favored certain individuals, religious groups, or even nations as "chosen" or "elect" people. At its root, election referred to the concept of being chosen by God. This idea brought into play the question of who was chosen (both at the individual and collective levels), when they were chosen, and for what purpose they were chosen. Election expanded into a powerful idea with multiple dimensions in the religiously diverse British Atlantic, and its effects on the formation of religious and civic identities were far-reaching.

Among those who entered the debates surrounding election and chosenness were hundreds of women from a variety of confessional backgrounds.[2]

[1] Mary Aspinal, et al., *A Collection of Prophetical Warnings of the Eternal Spirit …* (London, 1708), 5. On the French Prophets, see Hillel Schwartz, *The French Prophets: The History of a Millenarian Group in Eighteenth Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

[2] This study uses the term "confessional" as it relates to the religious and theological identity of subgroups within early modern Christianity.

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These women lived and traveled throughout Northern Europe and the British Atlantic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Like Beer, many of them prophesied as professed instruments of God.[3] The following is a study of how such women – through their claims of revelation – negotiated and shaped ideas about chosenness, gender, and community in the British Atlantic world.

While the tradition of women engaging in public religious discourse did not begin with the British Civil Wars, it was the political and religious turmoil of the Civil War years that first opened up the world of prophecy to early modern dissenting women on a large scale.[4] The explosion of radical Protestant[5] groups during this time of upheaval produced the first great wave of female prophecy in the British Atlantic. It also influenced groups such as the Society of Friends (Quakers), who emerged in the ensuing years. Women who prophesied in the decades during and after the British Civil Wars came from a number of traditions, most of them dissenting Protestant ones. Represented in this study are Quaker, German Pietist, French Prophet, General and Particular Baptist, English Philadelphian, Dutch Labadist, and Fifth Monarchist women.[6]

[3] The number of women prophets during the years from 1640 to 1715 is considerable. Phyllis Mack estimates that nearly 300 women prophesied during the Civil Wars and Interregnum. While this period represented the height of early modern prophetic activity, female prophecy continued throughout the Restoration and into the eighteenth century. On the numbers of Civil War prophets, see Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1992), 1.

[4] In 1958, when Keith Thomas published his article on women prophets in the English Revolution, "Women and the Civil War Sects," he initiated what has developed into two generations of scholarship on British women prophets. See Thomas, "Women and the Civil War Sects," *Past and Present* 13, no. 1 (1958): 42–62.

[5] As Sylvia Brown has noted, the term "radical" can have different connotations based on whether one's perspective is that of an insider or an outsider. See Sylvia Brown, "Introduction," in *Women, Gender and Radical Religion in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1–2. Radical Protestant groups in the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century British Atlantic arose amid the context of a number of events, including the British Civil Wars, the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, a schism of German Pietism, and various societal crises that helped fuel apocalyptic and millenarian expectations. Despite their differences, all radical Protestants shared a desire for further religious reform. And most – at least in their initial phases – offered women opportunities for participation not found among established churches.

[6] The Quakers, or Society of Friends, emerged under the leadership of George Fox in mid-seventeenth-century England. German Pietists were part of a larger group of northern European Protestants who pushed for further renewal and reforms to the Lutheran and Reformed churches. The French Prophets, of radical Calvinist background, attracted numerous English followers when they arrived in London from the South of France in the early eighteenth century. Dutch Labadists were a continental pietistic group who first flourished under the leadership of the French Calvinist Jean de Labadie (1610–74). The Fifth Monarchists were a radical Civil War group who gave apocalyptic interpretations to England's mid-seventeenth-century political crises. The following chapters will define and explore each of these groups in greater depth.

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But while this study often labels prophets according to their national and religious affiliations, early modern Protestantism – and the prophetic movements that came out if it – had a transnational, transconfessional quality.[7] Prophets not only traveled throughout the Atlantic, but they also corresponded with those of other nationalities and religious persuasions. At a collective level, shared influences existed between English Quakers and German Pietists, as well as between French Prophets and English Philadelphians. One should not overstate these common influences, since early modern religious groups often emphasized theological difference over commonality. However, if we are to gain a fuller understanding of the religious culture of the early modern British Atlantic, we must recognize the porosity of borders – both sectarian and political.

Whatever their sectarian affiliation, women prophets participated in a number of communities at the domestic, parochial, regional, national, and even transnational levels. In order to establish themselves as chosen prophets operating within various communities, they evoked cultural and theological notions of election. When women donned ashes and sackcloth like the biblical prophet Isaiah, for example, they called for repentance and mourned for their community, city, or nation. At the same time, they often declared themselves and those who subscribed to their religious beliefs as chosen persons set aside from the corruption surrounding them. As such, language of election factored into prophetic reinscriptions of community boundaries.

For many female prophets, these reimaginings of community took place in the context of an expanding British Atlantic world. Scholars have given considerable attention to defining the parameters of the British Atlantic world, but it remains somewhat of "an imprecise geographical expression."[8] Definitions vary according to the economic, religious, political, or social networks and structures in question. In the case of the dissenters considered here, the study of female prophecy takes us through Northern Europe and

[7] On the transnational and transconfessional nature of radical Protestant movements, see Rosalind J. Beiler "Dissenting Religious Communication Networks and European Migration, 1660–1710," in *Soundings in Atlantic History: Latent Structures and Intellectual Currents*, eds. Bernard Bailyn and Patricia L. Denault (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 210–36; Hartmut Lehmann, "Pietism in the World of Transatlantic Religious Revivals," in *Pietism in Germany and North America, 1680–1820*, eds. Jonathan Strom, Hartmut Lehmann, and James Van Horn Melton (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 13–21; Lucinda Martin, "Female Reformers as the Gatekeepers of Pietism: The Example of Johanna Eleonora Merlau and William Penn," *Monatshefte* 95 (Spring 2003): 33–58.

[8] David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, "Introduction," in *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800.*, eds. David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 3.

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the British Isles and across the Atlantic Ocean to colonial North America. Quaker prophets, for example, traveled and lived throughout England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and colonial North America. In the American colonies, women prophesied primarily in Boston and Rhode Island, while a few ventured as far south as the Carolinas, Jamaica, and Barbados. Non-British prophets also shaped the religious culture of the early modern British Atlantic. The French Prophets settled in London in 1706 to escape persecution; in the process, they attracted a number of English adherents. Radical German Pietists had an important presence in early Pennsylvania.[9] The prolific Netherlandish prophet Antoinette Bourignon never set foot in the British Isles, and yet she managed to pose such a threat to Scottish Protestantism that the General Assembly passed two ordinances against her followers and made renunciation of "Bourignianism" a condition of ordination.[10] Thus, while this is a study about female prophecy in the British Atlantic, the international character of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century religiosity broadens its scope beyond its British roots.

Radical Protestants in the early modern Atlantic world would not have used the word "network" to describe their activity,[11] yet their activity was similar to what we might define as a network in that they created an interconnected system with nodes, hubs, and linkages that facilitated mobility.[12] In an age of increased migration and mobility, networks became essential to persons operating in the Atlantic world. As Bernard Bailyn notes, "there were Atlantic networks everywhere – economic, religious, social, cultural."[13]

[9] Radical German Pietism emerged out of the late seventeenth-century split between moderate, ecclesial Pietists and their more radical counterparts (who emphasized various beliefs related to millenarianism and revealed religion). For a brief overview, see Jonathan Strom, "Pietism," in *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, eds. Ian A. McFarland, David A. S. Fergusson, Karen Kilby, and Iain R. Torrance (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 389–90.

[10] Alexander R. MacEwen, *Antoinette Bourignon, Quietist* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910), 14–15.

[11] On the use of the term "network" to describe early modern activity, see David Hancock, "The Trouble with Networks: Managing the Scots' Early-Modern Madeira Trade," *The Business History Review* 79, no. 3 (2005): 471–73. Scholars are just now beginning to recognize the extent to which networks facilitated the development of the early modern Atlantic world as an arena made up of composite political, religious, social, and economic systems.

[12] Jessica Harland-Jacobs, "Networks for Migrations and Mobility," in *Oxford Bibliographies in Atlantic History*, ed. Trevor Burnard (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), "Introduction." Historians vary in their approach to networks, from employing the term without defining it to devoting considerable attention to sociological analysis of the concept.

[13] Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 100.

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These various types of early modern networks frequently overlapped.[14] Hence, while dissenting networks primarily focused on religious debates, dissenters (male and female) also participated in social, family, and economic networks.

The Quaker William Penn offers an example here. When he visited radical Pietists in the Netherlands and Germany, he went as a missionary and a fellow reformer, but he was also recruiting potential emigrants and investors for his "holy experiment" in Pennsylvania.[15] Penn's extensive commercial and political connections allowed him to take on an exceptional role in the networks in which he participated. However, female dissenters also held important functions in economic, social, family, communication, and intellectual networks. The Dutch polymath Anna Maria van Schurman, in addition to her active participation in radical Pietist circles, served both as an important figure in the seventeenth-century republic of letters and as the center of an intellectual women's network. The bookseller and printer Tace Sowle was the leading printer for the Society of Friends in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Through her profession, she participated in printing and international distribution networks that facilitated the spread of Quaker printed material (including the writings of female prophets).[16]

Examples of women such as Schurman and Sowle suggest that to understand fully the history of early modern dissenting women, one must consider not only their individual agency but also how they functioned as members of various overlapping networks. Such an approach, when applied to the study of early modern female prophecy, recognizes the intensity and complexity of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century religious discourses surrounding gender and election. At the same time, it allows insight into how religion interacted with other social factors, ranging from migration to political instability, which influenced how female prophets moved concepts of election beyond the theological sphere to inform broader cultural, social, and political ideas about community and chosenness.

[14] David Hancock, *Oceans of Wine: Madeira and the Emergence of American Trade and Taste* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), xx–xxi.

[15] This overlap in religious and economic goals appears as well in the mutual aid networks of seventeenth-century Anabaptists and Mennonites. See Beiler, "Dissenting Religious Communication Networks and European Migration, 1660–1710."

[16] On Schurman see Carol Pal, *Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Paula McDowell, "Sowle, Tace (1666–1749)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, eds. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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DEFINING THE EARLY MODERN FEMALE PROPHET

To accommodate a considerable range of religious views and practices, this study defines prophecy broadly – and as early modern women often understood it – as "speaking for God."[17] Importantly, prophecy is not limited to words; it can extend to any form of expression believed to be produced by God through human agency.[18] As such, the following chapters consider prophetic performance as a whole – both the actions and rhetoric of women prophets. While one's religious background certainly influenced how she chose to "speak for God," it was not the sole determining factor. Based on the women prophets considered in this study, it is possible to sketch a typology of early modern female prophecy that transcends formal religious affiliation.

Essential to any typology of prophecy is how the prophet chose to relay her message. Prophets communicated their messages through a variety of mechanisms and discursive forms. One mechanism was lay preaching, which was often referred to as "tub preaching" or "mechanic preaching" during the seventeenth century.[19] Preaching and prophesying could be interchangeable in meaning, in the sense that lay preachers emphasized that their messages were prophetic in nature. The key distinction for dissenters was not one of rhetorical form but rather authorial voice; the role of inspiration was paramount. Dissenting preachers framed their authority in terms of inspiration, sometimes drawing a contrast to learned theologians and professional clerics. Lay preaching was especially popular among mid-seventeenth-century women, whose messages – and locations – varied. One English Puritan, Susan May, was even said to preach in a barn.[20] Women also prophesied in response to the preaching of others. This practice was especially common among Quaker women, who participated in 34 percent of recorded cases in which Friends interrupted the preaching of a minister.[21]

[17] Robert R. Wilson defines the biblical prophet, a key model for seventeenth-century prophets, as "a person who serves as a channel of communication between the human and divine worlds." See Wilson, Robert R. "Prophet," in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed., eds. Paul J. Achtemeier and Roger Boraas (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 884–89.

[18] Diane Purkiss, "Producing the Voice, Consuming the Body: Women Prophets of the Seventeenth Century," in *Women, Writing, History, 1640–1740*, eds. Isabel Grundy and Susan Wiseman (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1992), 139.

[19] Tub preaching took its name from the use of a tub as a makeshift pulpit. "Mechanic" preaching was frequently associated with artisans. See Carla Gardina Pestana, *Quakers and Baptists in Colonial Massachusetts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 171.

[20] Anonymous, *A Discoverie of Six Women Preachers, in Middlesex, Kent, Cambridgshire, and Salisbury* … (London, 1641), 4.

[21] Barry Reay, *The Quakers and the English Revolution* (London: Temple Smith, 1985), 26. Geoffrey Nuttall characterizes this type of prophesying as a combination of scriptural

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Narrative writing represents another way that prophets chose to communicate their messages. Many narrative writings fit this study's definition of prophecy in that the writers claimed they were "pressed in spirit" or under an obligation to speak God's truth. Spiritual autobiographies (which developed out of the Puritan tradition) and testimonies (which developed out of the Quaker tradition) were two important forms of narrative writing that prophets employed. The spiritual autobiography had roots in the Puritan conversion narrative that both reassured the author of his or her salvation and improved the author's standing in the Puritan community. This genre spread to other sectarian groups, particularly to those with a Calvinist bent, who adapted the conversion narrative to other forms of writing. For example, the Philadelphian Ann Bathurst kept a spiritual diary (which she intended for circulation) for almost twenty years.[22] Her diary evoked a Puritan spiritual autobiography in that it traced her path to salvation, but the bulk of her entries focused on her prophetic visions and dreams. Many Quakers wrote narrative testimonies that bore witness to a particular issue. Some, such as Judith Boulbie's testimony against "hireling [hired] priests," had impersonal elements.[23] Testimonies also could take on a form that was close to the Puritan spiritual autobiography. Barbara Blaugdone wrote an account of her conversion, her call to ministry, and her experiences as a missionary, which was "Given forth as a Testimony to the Lord's Power, and for the Encouragement of Friends."[24]

Correspondence was another way that women prophets communicated. Letter writing enabled women of various religious affiliations to share their theological expositions, visions, or prophecies with others. Letters varied in content from spiritual instruction to explanation of scripture to theological debate. Some women sent prophetic letters to the king or other political leaders. Others, including Pietists and Quakers, communicated to those of other nationalities.[25]

interpretation, personal testimony, and exhortation given after the preacher had finished his sermon. See Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 75–76.

[22] Ann Bathurst, "Rhapsodical Meditations and Visions," 2 vols., Rawlinson MSS D. 1262–63, Bodleian Library, Oxford. On spiritual autobiography in early modern England, see D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[23] Judith Boulbie, *A Testimony for Truth against All Hireling Priests and Deceivers with a Cry to the Inhabitants of This Nation to Turn to the Lord before His Dreadful Judgments Overtake Them: Also a Testimony Against All Observers of Times and Dayes* (London, 1665). "Hireling priest" was an epithet referring to a professional cleric.

[24] Barbara Blaugdone, *An Account of the Travels, Sufferings and Persecutions of Barbara Blaugdone Given Forth as a Testimony to the Lord's Power, and for the Encouragement of Friends* (London, 1691).

[25] For more on letters and correspondence, see Chapter 5.

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As for the substance of female prophetic discourse, all the women in this study shared an emphasis on revelation. The particular ways in which prophets received and communicated these revelatory disclosures are what separated them one from another. Take for example the Quaker Elizabeth Bathurst, who described how God was "pleased to appear unto me, (magnified be his Name forever) and to cast up a living way for me." Once a recipient of God's grace, Bathurst "found the God of all grace, laying a more special Injunction upon me to visit [the members of her Presbyterian congregation] particularly."[26] She was a visionary in that she believed she experienced direct revelation from God, but her writing was not that of an ecstatic visionary. She did not focus on symbolic signs or charismatic preaching. By contrast, the French Prophets were ecstatic visionaries; they entered into trances and spoke in tongues.

These different manifestations of prophecy were closely related to how the prophet interpreted the role of the body in communicating revelation. An essential element of the prophetic process involved the spirit overtaking or directing the human body. Trances, agitations, visions, sweating, singing, striking, shaking, and reenacting the symbolic gestures of biblical prophets represent just some of the prophetic actions involving the body. The prophet's theological beliefs were a driving force in defining how she embodied her prophecy. But there was also an inherent theatricality to many of these prophetic acts by the mere quality of the human body "performing" a role under the direction of the spirit. This performance could be accepted by the prophet's audience, or – as we will see in the case of the French Prophets in Chapter 4 – it could be disputed, ridiculed, or reviled.[27] At any rate, the prophetic act engaged more than just the individual who claimed (and usually believed the claim) that her body was a conduit for prophecy. It also involved an audience.

The public forum of prophecy explains in part why, for early modern women, the relationship between prophecy and the body was especially fraught. As Mary Fissell writes, "women's bodies were sites of contest, places that people argued about and through which they tried to construct themselves as authoritative."[28] The female prophet had a difficult task: She not only had to establish her authority as a prophet, but she also had to do so as a woman. In

[26] Elizabeth Bathurst, *An Expostulatory Appeal to the Professors of Christianity Joyned in Community with Samuel Ansley* (London, 1680), 2–3.

[27] On performance and audience, see Clarke Garrett, *Origins of the Shakers: From the Old World to the New World* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 4–5.

[28] Mary Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies: The Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12–13.

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exploring how embodied religious experience changed over time and among various dissenting women, this study will highlight the role that concepts of gender and election played in shaping these changes. Female prophets of all dissenting persuasions were aware of their gender and the problems it posed for their public religious expression.[29] Their varied responses to this awareness echo Sarah Apetrei's observation that "there was a range of possible ways of thinking about the gendered relationships between body, mind, and spirit" in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.[30]

We can place most early modern women who prophesied into roughly three categories based on how they interpreted the relationship between gender and prophecy. Prophets from all categories cited Joel 2:28–29 (cf. Acts 2:17–18), that God would pour out a prophetic spirit on men and women in the final days, as justification of female prophecy. But they differed in the importance they assigned gender. The first category, which included women such as Civil War prophets and the early Quakers, found their prophetic authority in minimizing the role of gender in prophecy. The second category, found among Behmenists (followers of the theology of Jacob Boehme) and radical Pietists, believed that women had a role distinct to their gender as millenarian reformers who would usher in the new age. A third category appears among the last major group addressed in this book, the French Prophets. Female French Prophets often prophesied as part of a group, and the extent to which they prophesied using gendered language often depended on their role within the group's prophetic performance.

For the context of this study, it is also essential to typologize female prophecy as it relates to millenarianism (which anticipated the arrival of a major societal transformation). Prophets exhibited a wide range of millenarian beliefs, from those who saw the end of the world as a time of destruction to those who envisioned a time of restoration in which humans would be restored to unity with the divine.[31] Despite their differences, most prophets shared an interest in what role they – as chosen vessels of God's word – held

[29] On a theoretical level, some women (such as early Quakers) believed that prophecy involved an erasure of gender distinctions and a disembodiment from one's carnal identity. But they continued to be aware of the consequences of their entrance into the public sphere as women, and even to respond to criticisms using gendered language. See Kate Peters, *Print Culture and the Early Quakers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 140.

[30] Sarah Apetrei, *Women, Feminism, and Religion in Early Enlightenment England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 18.

[31] On millenarianism and catastrophe, see Catherine Wessinger, "Millenialism With and Without the Mayhem," in *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem*, eds. Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer (New York: Routledge, 1997), 47–59.

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in the preparational events leading to the end times, whenever and however they would unfold.

Millenarian prophecy in Britain peaked during the Civil Wars and again during the 1690s in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution. Many of the political events of both revolutions were interpreted through an apocalyptic lens. The Fifth Monarchists, one of the most radical groups of the era, believed that the political events of the Civil Wars were signs of Christ's imminent return. They sought to assure civic reform in advance of this messianic arrival.[32] After the Restoration, the intensity of millenarian prophecy diminished, but millenarian beliefs did not disappear among female prophets. The second-generation Quakers, for example, came to embrace a focus on the spiritual (as opposed to the literal) return of Christ to earth. But while they focused less on the signs of the times that pointed to Christ's arrival, their prophetic discourse still maintained an interest in the transformative experience of the indwelling of the Spirit – an inward process which they saw as representative of an outward process that one day would occur throughout creation.[33]

Continental influences, such as Pietism and (later) the arrival of the French Prophets, assured the place of millenarian religious thought in the British Atlantic throughout the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The French Prophets formed out of a group of exiled Camisards, radical Calvinists who left the south of France for London in 1706. Once in London, they took great interest in the New Jerusalem that they believed would soon arrive, although they were less specific about its particulars than were the Fifth Monarchists. They preached a message of repentance, that they might bring others into the fold of true believers who would be spared God's judgment.[34]

Another key continental influence on millenarian prophecy was Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), a German theologian and theosophist.[35] Boehme's followers, known as Behmenists, existed throughout Europe and Britain. Behmenist millenarianism produced a mystical style of prophecy that became

[32] For an overview of the Fifth Monarchists, see Bernard S. Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men: A Study in Seventeenth-Century English Millenarianism* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1972).

[33] Catherine Wilcox, *Theology and Women's Ministry in Seventeenth-Century English Quakerism: Handmaids of the Lord* (Lewiston, NY: Edward Mellen Press, 1995), 96.

[34] See Schwartz, *The French Prophets*.

[35] As a theosophist, Boehme sought to understand nature, the world, and cosmology by gaining knowledge of divine nature. His work drew on mystical, esoteric, and occult traditions (including Gnosticism and Kabbalism). For an introduction to Boehme, see Hessayon and Apetrei, eds., *An Introduction to Jacob Boehme: Four Centuries of Thought and Reception* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

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