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978-1-107-01705-4 - Heresy Trials and English Women Writers, 1400–1670

Genelle Gertz

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## HERESY TRIALS AND ENGLISH WOMEN WRITERS, 1400–1670

This book charts the emergence of women's writing from the procedures of heresy trials and recovers a tradition of women's trial narratives from the late Middle Ages to the seventeenth century. Analyzing the interrogations of Margery Kempe, Anne Askew, Marian Protestant women, Margaret Clitherow, and Quakers Katharine Evans and Sarah Cheevers, the book examines the complex dynamics of women's writing, preaching, and authorship under religious persecution and censorship. Archival sources illuminate not only the literary choices women made, showing how they wrote to justify their teaching even when their authority was questioned, but also their complex relationship with male interrogators. Women's speech was paradoxically encouraged and constrained, and male editors preserved their writing while shaping it to their own interests. This book challenges conventional distinctions between historical and literary forms while identifying a new tradition of women's writing across Catholic, Protestant, and sectarian communities and the medieval/early modern divide.

GENELLE GERTZ is Associate Professor of English at Washington and Lee University and teaches courses on medieval and early modern literature.

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*For my parents, Greg and Jeanette, and my son, Owen*

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## *Acknowledgments*

Though I could not have known it at the time, this book grew out of a conversation I had with my father, a Baptist minister, when I was in high school. Why couldn't women preach, I asked, when so many women in our church were standing up and testifying? He answered that it was scripturally unsupported, but that he was not opposed to women's speech and in fact wrote his seminary thesis on the practice of lay testimony in church. (When I wrote the second and fifth chapters of this book I discovered that many other clergy, including Baptists, also wrestled with contradictions between textual authority, on the one hand, and women's spiritual gifts, on the other.) To my great surprise, in graduate school I came across seventeenth-century women writers who used the same language I had grown up hearing from the pulpit and pew. The collection of autobiographical writing, *Her Own Life*, edited by Elspeth Graham and others, inspired me to look even earlier in history to see whether there were also women preachers. Scholarly editions of medieval and sixteenth-century women writers enabled my research, and I am profoundly grateful for the editorial work that many scholars, especially Lynn Staley and Elaine Beilin, did to provide informative editions of early women writers.

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