

A Response to Kathleen Lynch, “How does the fixity of print become a problem for religious identity?”

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Kathleen Lynch has adroitly illustrated the ways in which seventeenth-century printing techniques reinforced the religious purposes of Protestant spiritual vignettes by depicting an individual life brought to completion by the redemptive power of God. The literature of English religious dissent, Lynch suggests, displayed “a fixation on completion.” During the 1640s, this fixation operated at several interactive levels of generalization. Socially, it propelled movements toward the completion of the reformation of the English church and inspired millenarian visions of the completion of human history, but, equally, it evoked narratives of the self raised to completion by divine grace, perhaps thereby prefiguring those wider social and cosmic consummations. This was the case with Lynch’s paradigmatic illustration, the narrative of Sarah Wight compiled by the dissenting minister Henry Jessey, *The Exceeding Riches of Grace Advanced* (1647, with numerous subsequent editions). Since personal vignettes such as Sarah Wight’s aimed to represent both the constancy of God and the constancy of faith, the “fidelity” of the text mattered. For this reason, in later editions of *Exceeding Riches*, Henry Jessey and his printers retained the initial, 1647 rendition of Wight’s narrative, adding further information about Wight in paratextual postscripts and, all the while, printing the book on the same number of sheets of paper throughout its multiple editions.

So, to turn directly to Lynch’s question, “how does the fixity of print become a problem for religious identity?” One avenue for approaching this question is to pair the key words of the question. What interpretive problems are raised by the *print identity* of Sarah Wight? What ambiguities surrounded *religious fixity* in the seventeenth century?

The story of the *Exceeding Riches of Grace* bestowed on Sarah Wight was one of many printed narratives of prophetic ecstasy that issued from the presses in the 1640s and 1650s. In these texts the print identity of the author or the subject of the narrative was never simply the identity of a singular self. Instead, figures such as Sarah Wight were representative of specific communities, of the spiritual plight of “everyman” at a pivotal moment in history, and ultimately of the illuminating word of God. As such, the print identity of the speaker included character traits and life episodes that were not only individually specific but also generic. For example, the identification of Wight as “an empty nothing creature” had numerous parallels in the printed personal narratives of the era. Wight’s fellow sectarian Anna Trapnel later had similar visionary experiences recorded by auditors and then printed in *The Cry of a Stone* (1654). The point of emphasizing the “nothingness” of the visionary becomes evident in the explanation provided by Trapnel’s recorder: “It is hoped in this day, a day of the Power of God, a day of wonders, of shaking the heavens and the earth, and of general expectation of the approachings of the Lord to his Temple, that any thing that pretends to be a Witness, a Voice, or a Message from God to this Nation, shall not be held unworthy the hearing and consideration of any, because it is administered by a simple and unlikely hand.” Wight and Trapnel became, in their print identities, representative instances of the obscure and humble figure whom God had now exalted as the instrument of prophecy and providence. Seventeenth-century England provides an especially rich trove of documents in which the print identity of the subject employed a specific individual to set forth idealized religious attributes.

As Kathleen Lynch has vividly described in reference to Sarah Wight, these printed narratives of spiritual illumination exhibited a pronounced theatricality as they competed in the marketplace of pamphlet literature with “true relations” of natural wonders and uncanny events. As declared on the title page of Trapnel’s narrative, her visions were “Uttered in Prayers and Spiritual Songs, by an Inspiration Extraordinary, and Full of Wonder.” At the same time, these personal narratives also shared characteristics with the broadsheets and short pamphlet news reports that circulated in London during the era of Sarah Wight. These theatrical and journalistic features of the printed personal narrative stood in direct tension with the broadly Puritan ideal of *religious fixity*. By calling attention to and setting down in print a wondrous episode from an as yet incomplete life, these narratives left their subjects open to doubt and criticism in light of subsequent events. Thus, the minister John Simpson—one of Sarah Wight’s sponsors—had written a series of prophetic letters from prison in 1653 and 1654. But in 1658, four discontented former members of Simpson’s congregation decided to print these letters, in a tract entitled *The Old Leaven Purged Out*, to demonstrate Simpson’s hypocrisy. Simpson, his critics declared, had now aligned himself with the very “Abominations” against which he had formerly witnessed and was now expressing repentance for “his errour, and evil, crying down all his former professions, & visions, as delusions, and of the flesh. Which hath staggered some, as to the very Principles of Godliness.” By closely identifying the voice of God with the voice of the visionary, the ideal of religious fixity could—and did—frequently stumble over its own rhetorical decisions.