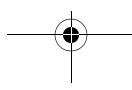


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THE GODLY CHILD'S "POWER AND EVIDENCE" IN THE WORD: ORALITY AND LITERACY IN THE MINISTRY OF SARAH WIGHT

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It has long been an uncontested and largely unqualified commonplace of historiography that the story of the Protestant Reformation is a story of reading and writing. This is a corollary of the equally unchallenged view of Christianity as a religion of the book.¹ Not surprisingly, both opinions owe their popularization to the Protestant Reformation itself, whose controversialists and publicists routinely exploited and touted print as an evangelical instrument. Besides the blatant message of the numerous esoteric works of biblical commentary and interpretation from this period that established reading and writing as the pillar of piety and 'true' religion, we can find in a popular text such as John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563) both a documentary archive of the acts of Christian martyrs and a monument to writing itself, which was the sine qua non for the martyrs' renown. But if we look beyond the words of clerics and other learned advocates to the experience of the laity, especially the experience of illiterate women and children, the Reformation story bears a somewhat different moral. In the practice of the less educated laity we find the persistence of a culture whose



religious knowledge and authority remained rooted in speech and oral modes of communication.

The account of the ordeal of Sarah Wight, an adolescent girl troubled by sin whose attempted suicide left her in a coma from which she awoke after eleven weeks, attributing her recovery to a visitation by Christ, affords a glimpse of this other culture. All that we know about Sarah Wight derives from the Protestant “best-seller”² tract composed for the press and first published in 1647 by the Baptist/Independent minister Henry Jessey, *The Exceeding Riches of Grace Advanced by the Spirit of Grace, in an Empty Nothing Creature, viz. Mistress Sarah Wight*.³ As this title suggests, Jessey’s book presents a sort of religious conversion narrative that anticipates John Bunyan’s now better-known example, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, in both its concept and execution. Like *Grace Abounding* and other works of its kind, *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* is concerned with an imminent spiritual reality that obviated regard for worldly posterity. Consequently, Jessey does not tell us much more about Sarah Wight than what is necessary to his purpose in publishing, as he put it, “her precious Evangelicall expressions,” (2) which was “for great refreshing to many sad, troubled, disconsolate souls,” (A8v) and “exalt[ing] and commend[ing] *the LORD*” (A3). Yet despite a paucity of personal detail, it is possible to piece together a rudimentary picture of Sarah Wight and her milieu. Wight was celebrated in her day, not as Martin Luther was, for being an author, a bearer of texts, but rather like a charismatic saint of old, for the performance of a miracle and her powers of healing. In the figure of Sarah Wight, the “child” symbolizes not so much a body’s physical immaturity as an intellectual disposition toward religious knowledge and authority, that of the “common” or “simple sort” of person in whose experience reading and writing and the habits of thought that inhere in such skills occupied a relatively minor place. In the child-like mentality of Sarah Wight and her similarly disposed communicants, embodiment and gesture are the dominant modes of religious practice and understanding.

The principal events related by Jessey occurred several months before Wight’s sixteenth birthday; the book containing the relation appeared just a month or two after. Wight was the child of Mary Wight, a widow

whose latest husband, Sarah's father, had been a clerk in the office of the auditor and the exchequer. Jessey describes Mary Wight as a "gracious *Matrone*" (A2), residing "in *Lawrence Pountney-Lane* near *Caning-Street*, in *LONDON*," (5) within a Tower Hill parish that Jessey frequented as a preacher. When Wight was nine years old, her mother suffered her own "deep afflictions of Spirit, and sore Temptations," (6) during which time Sarah was briefly placed in her paternal grandmother's custody, until, with Jessey's ministerial assistance, Mary Wight found Christ, not long after. By her "godly faithfull" grandmother, according to Jessey, Sarah was "*well trained up in the Scriptures*"; in her "faithfull" (5) mother's house, the girl "gave her selfe much to read and study the *Scriptures*," which "she then understood not aright." (6) This misunderstanding no doubt exacerbated a predisposition to despair. Jessey reports that "[f]rom her childhood, [Sarah Wight] was of a *tender* heart, and oft afflicted in Spirit" (6).

However, Wight's "more violent Temptations" began at age eleven (7). At the instigation of a superior, she stole some trivial thing. A month or so later, she lied to her mother about the whereabouts of an article of clothing. Afflicted in her conscience by these two misdeeds, Wight became "terrified ever since, that she was shut out of Heaven, and must be damn'd, damn'd" (7). Living "in a grievous hor- rour day and night" (8-9), she commenced a string of unsuccessful suicide attempts, seeking to die, in turn, "by drowning, strangling, stabbing, [and] ... beat[ing] out her braines" (7-8). She meanwhile consulted with several godly ministers both in London and beyond, to little or no avail. Ultimately Wight's unrest and self-destructive behavior drove her exhausted mother to hire an additional maid, whose sole duty was to act as Sarah's bodyguard, in order "to prevent her mischiev- ing her selfe" (13).

The servant, a woman named Hannah Gay, came to assume her place in the Wight household on the evening of April 6, 1647. On arrival, she found her new charge already in distress, "weeping most bitterly, & wringing her hands grievously, saying, *I am a Reprobate, a Castaway, I never had a good thought in all my life. I have been under sinne ever since I can remember, when I was but a childe, &c*" (14). Wight's condition rapidly escalated from bad to worse. According to Jessey,

who was not then present but took the testimony of Gay and Mary Wight verbatim,

Her hands and feet were clunched, so as shee could not stand. She was tempted to blaspheme God and die. And when shee was urged to speak, her tongue was smitten. Afterward she being laid down, she said to her Mother, *Ile lye still, and heare what God will say to me: He will speak Peace, Peace. If God will speak a word of Peace at the last moment, I should be contented.* Then she desired them that none might trouble her, but that shee might lie in peace. And she lay still, as in a sleep, or as in a trance rather. (15)

She stirred only occasionally, to drink a few cups of water. Here, from Jessey's standpoint, at least, Wight's story truly begins, for, in the minister's words, "... this was the time of love, when the exceeding riches of Grace was advanced" (15).

Besides her lameness, Wight was found to be "struck blind and deafe" (15). She lay abed in this state, eating nothing and drinking little, for four days. On the fourth day, about midnight, according to Jessey, Wight started to come to her senses, and "began to expresse the first expressions of comforts" (15), or "speeches of Grace" (3), which she continued to do, sporadically, in the presence of her mother, stepbrother, Hannah Gay, Mr. Simpson the parish minister, and Jessey, for about two weeks. During this period, word spread of Wight's condition. After public offerings of prayer in her name both in her own parish church and in those of the adjacent parishes, a steady stream of "diverse neighbors and loving friends" headed down the lane and up the stairs to Wight's bedside, desiring "to hear her speake, being much taken and greatly refreshed with what they had heard of her" (35). *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* records the exact words of twenty-three separate conferences Wight had with visitors during her seventy-day convalescence—roughly, one every three days. The attendees at these bedroom assemblies ranged in number from one to as many as twelve persons at a time, comprising an extended congregation whose social composition included lords and ladies of the lower nobility, the local gentry, and most frequently, common servants. Wight graciously entertained such guests, lying with a sheet of linen over her weak eyes, speaking to her company typically "with a low

voyce, in a humble, modest, melting manner, her teares sometimes stopping her speech" (35). According to Jessey, who was the most frequent bedside visitor outside the Wight household, "He and the rest, listened, and were greatly affected in hearing her" (35), being moved "even to admiration, in hearing a child so speak" (38). In fact, Jessey apologized, in one aside, "It cannot affect so much in hearing it at second hand, as if you had heard it her self, with such brokenness of heart uttering it" (35).

Nevertheless, the minister sought out and scrupulously transcribed nearly every word Wight was heard to utter, as well as those of her interlocutors, on a daily basis (55). At first, Jessey intended his transcript merely to provide some exemplary and edifying "golden sayings" and "last words," as it appeared to everyone that Wight was gradually starving herself to death. Early modern evangelicals of both the radical and moderate sorts highly valued the last words of persons deemed to have died gracefully, as Wight was thought likely to do. Besides a memorial function, the preservation of such discourse served a practical purpose, by exemplifying how to live and die in a godly way, and thereby to anticipate salvation. Ministers accordingly catered to popular expectation, collecting and then publishing pious utterances by means of the preached and occasionally printed funeral sermon seasoned with sayings. Throughout her ordeal, Sarah Wight proved to be an "exceedingly rich" source of such seasoning. However, after the abrupt and unanticipated full recovery of her senses and appetite nearly two months since she began her public interviews, Jessey ended up producing instead of a funeral sermon a quasi-biographical book, a written documentary testament of Wight's "deliverance," which he believed to be a "marvellous" (A6v) and "wonder[ful]" (A7) work of Gods "tender-Mercie" (A2v), worthy of remembrance through magnification in print (A2v).

Although a publication such as *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* was not unknown to early modern England—it is regarded today as a specimen of the small but important prophet/prodigy/portent division of the large "wonderfull and strange news" class of early modern English printed texts, and as such likely found a ready audience within a cultural horizon of expectation defined by providential occurrences⁴—it remains nevertheless remarkable for its painstaking exactness in

preserving and promoting the experience and pronouncements of an otherwise unremarkable individual, a female and an adolescent, to boot. Jessey's apparent effort to position this "empty nothing creature" center stage in his account, making her its authority, while relegating his own presence in the text to the marginal role of amanuensis and advocate, is untypical of relations describing the spiritual experience of women and children. Even less typical is the work's brief but intense popularity: it went to seven editions in the first ten years of publication, with two more in the next ten. The total numbered twelve before the end of the seventeenth century.⁵ It is fair to say the Wight phenomenon stirred significant and unparalleled contemporary interest, in both its live and recorded performances.

Recently, scholars have cottoned to the figure of Wight as an example of the exceptional power of the female "prophets" of seventeenth-century England.⁶ For instance, Nigel Smith considers Wight's speeches within the context of radical puritan religious prophesy of the 1640s and 1650s, noting that by her confessional discourse Wight "gains the authority of an inspired and wise woman within the community who may be consulted for spiritual advice."⁷ Barbara Ritter Dailey, who focuses on Jessey's printed account as an example of texts in the longstanding *ars moriendi* tradition, attributes the power of Wight's "lay preaching" to the credence seventeenth-century evangelical Protestants, like their Roman Catholic forebears, habitually accorded to the last dying words of the godly.⁸ Taking the work of these predecessors as a point of departure, Katharine Gillespie accords Wight the symbolic status of a "girl-king" in her account of early modern women's participation in the cultural formation of what Gillespie calls the "sovereign individual."⁹ Recently, Wight's profile has been elevated further by a rising tide of scholarly interest in the experience of early modern children. In her account of Wight's prophetic power, Susan Hardman Moore stresses Wight's social position as a child, over and above her femaleness. She poses the difficult question, "how could a child leap so dramatically from the periphery to the centre, from inferiority to authority[?]" in order to propose that Wight epitomizes the vulnerable spiritual character that early modern contemporaries attributed to children, which formed the basis of the fascination she engendered.¹⁰ This is, I believe, a plausible position, though it cries out

for further research into the beliefs of seventeenth-century evangelical Protestants about children's emotions and spirituality. In what follows, I will develop an alternative explanation for the popular interest in Wight, which focuses on the girl's religious insight and communicative practice, rather than on her role as a woman, a dying Christian, or a child.

Certainly, Moore is correct to insist on Sara Wight's role as a child. Although, according to long tradition, the age of legal adulthood in various contexts of early modern English society hovered around fifteen, the seventeenth century saw numerous attempts to retard youth's attainment of legal maturity. Religious "adulthood" was also delayed, to the extent that, as the historian Keith Thomas reports, in early modern England, "The full Christian life was not for adolescents."¹¹ In keeping with these trends, Jessey repeatedly used the term "child" to express both Wight's worldly and spiritual immaturity, above all other likely means of describing her. By such usage Jessey intended a figurative meaning as well, in which Wight as "child" epitomized a specific relation to scripture that corresponded to the understanding of many who knew of her story, either by reading it themselves or hearing tell of it by others: that of the unlearned and/or inexperienced soul. In making this association Jessey drew upon a linkage commonly made in the titles and introductions of early modern catechisms, which indicate that childhood and ignorance of Christian knowledge were synonymous.¹² But we can be even more precise than Moore has been in refining our description of Wight: rather than as a child-prophet, the girl was in fact presented to her audience as a child-"minister." In displaying Wight thus, Jessey merely endorsed Wight's own self-description, which emerged in the dramatic culmination of her ordeal. On day seventy-five by Jessey's reckoning, June 10, to be exact, at about 10 o'clock at night, Wight experienced a manifestation of divine presence, which "came in, as if it had been whispered to her soule from God" (134). The voice instructed her, Wight later said, "as ... Paul," to "*Rise, and stand upon thy feet: For I have appeared to thee for this purpose, to be a Minister and a witness. ...*" "So," Jessey explained to his readers, "God had bid her *Arise ...* that she might be a *Witness* of the Grace of God, to *minister* to others, what he had *administered* unto her. And that as *Paul should be a witnes, both of the sufferings of Christ*

for him, and of his own sufferings for the Name of Christ: So shee should be a witness of both in like manner. ... and now shee must testifie and minister that Grace of God that shee had received, unto others" (135). Such a concept of Wight's role was underwritten by the book's reference to nine other scripture-places "of *ministering to others*," which "were brought into her besides that of *Paul*" (136–137). By this spectral inundation of scriptural authority, according to Jessey, "a full perswasion was given to her therewith, that so it should be with her selfe" (137). Wight's conversion and subsequent vocation, it seems, was the palpable experience of a calling by the voice of the spirit: it addressed her in a manner that she and Jessey both interpreted as a divine ordination or sacred commission, endorsed by holy writ, to minister the exceeding riches of the Christian god's grace to others.

After daybreak the next morning, Wight directed her maid to find and read aloud from scripture the actual chapter and verse places that occurred to convince her in the night, and then, speaking with "*power and evidence*," not in the feeble manner of the days before, asked for some broiled fish (138). She ate it, miraculously, "not finding the least distemper or inconvenience at all thereby" (138), then dressed, "and *arose*, and *stood* on her feet" (139). Fifteen days later she was able to walk unassisted (143). Five days after that she left her house for the first time, to attend a monthly fast at nearby Great Allhallows (147). Immediately following the service, Wight traveled about a mile to call on "two women, that were in deep despaire, for refreshing them by the comforts shee had received, being greatly affected with their sad conditions." The next day, she traveled another mile, to visit another sad soul; meanwhile, many others still "resorted to" her at home "daily ... who would draw out expressions from her" (p147–148). By appearances, Wight was conducting, as one recent scholar puts it, "a regular day clinic" for despairing women.¹³ Jessey reports that Wight found herself so in demand that she had to remove temporarily to the country, "that she might be more *retired*, and recover strength, for further service among the little ones, that are afflicted &c" (148). The importance and necessity of Wight's activity to Jessey seems clear: without reservation, he praises the "notable and marvailous ... work" of God in delivering Wight from perdition and enabling her "so to improve

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and make use of the *Holy Scriptures*, to despairing soules, and other-ways” (150–151).

To be sure, Wight’s “ministry” was hardly conventional. Given the prohibitions placed upon both women and children in early modern English civil society, ecclesiastical authorization of her sacred commission would have been unthinkable. However, Wight was divinely ordained during the heady days of the Interregnum, when sectarian interests held sway politically, and all sorts of unorthodox religious practices flourished. Had her manifestation occurred at some other time, she might not have found the favor of such an eloquent and enthusiastic advocate as Jessey, who cautioned readers with “no experience of such kind speakings of the Spirit ... or of such manner or measure of Faith as here is mentioned,” not to “*decry, or cry down what thou knowest not*” (157). Even so, there were limits to what pretensions to power might be allowed of laypeople, especially the underage. As the historian Anne Laurence notes, despite the leveling tendencies of many sectarian congregations at this time, “it is far from clear how widespread was the belief that ministerial gifts might be found in anyone, and that they must be given the freedom to exercise them.”¹⁴ Although uneducated “mechanic” men might gain authority as ministers, women, even articulate, somewhat educated women of middling or better social status, such as Sarah Wight, who appears to have acquired at least the grammar school basics (she could write as well as read), were largely excluded from church organization by the sects, to the same degree that they were by the Church of England.¹⁵ Children were so beyond the pale in this respect that despite their ubiquity in society—at the middle of the seventeenth century, children under fifteen made up roughly 35 percent of the population¹⁶—little or no mention whatsoever is made of their ministerial qualifications in the early modern controversies over ecclesiastical authority. We might expect such silence, as the sects continued to respect differences of age even after they set aside most other marks of social distinction, evidence of the degree to which the practice of early modern society adhered to its traditional gerontocratic ideal.¹⁷ Indeed, to the best of my knowledge, there is virtually no evidence of child ministers in evangelical Protestantism before the mid-nineteenth century. To the extent that children were seen or heard at all in early modern England, they appear

most frequently as perpetrators of disorder. On the whole, children were subject, and hardly equal, to the authority of adults.¹⁸ The same can also be said of the relation between the unlettered laity and the lettered, especially the lettered clergy.

In this light, Wight's personal spiritual authority was as remarkable as her deliverance from despair and imminent death. However, *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* cautions against paying undue attention to Wight's person. It admonishes readers to "Exalt the Lord the Creator alone, and not the Creature: Say not, *What a one is shee?* but, *What a God is he?* in all reading, or speaking, of her, or to her. For the Lord is jealous of his glory, and will not give it to an image of him" (156). In keeping with this warning, Jessey limited his work to establishing the legitimacy of Wights's ministry, explaining the child's "power and evidence" in the word as yet another divine gift. Anticipating that many would "*hardly beleeve*" that Wight's discourse "*should flow from a childe, not sixteen years old*" (A6v), he listed the names of the child's more socially prominent visitors and other reputable witnesses "for better satisfying some, that would know many particulars distinctly" (A). Furthermore, in the second edition's epistle to the Christian reader, Jessey explained that

If some yet say; How is it possible, that one so young, and never understanding to purpose till now, should be able so to speak? Tis answered; This is the Lord's work and it is marvellous in our eyes: who out of the mouths of babes and sucklings, hath ordained strength, & perfected praise. ... And hath promised to his, to power out of his Spirit in the last dayes, upon them, and upon their children, their sons and daughters. ... Our Lord Jesus promised to his Disciples, that his Holy Spirit should bring to their remembrance, what he had said to them. ... This good Spirit brought to her remembrance now, when it was most usefull, what she had read and heard formerly, and opened her heart to understand them: and opened her mouth to utter them in an humbling, melting manner; as he opened to her; even her bodily eyes and ears were held. ... (second edition, London, 1647, Av)

But Jessey could not simply wield the sword of holy writ to dictate how others should regard this marvel. Despite its manifold reference to scriptural precedent as the grounds of the girl's activity, in order for Jessey's book's bid to legitimate Wight's ministry ultimately to succeed,

its subject's performance had first to be deemed credible by the local community of believers, the majority of whom were of the simple sort. There reputation was established first and foremost by eye- and ear-witness. For this reason Jessey situated his transcriptions of Wight's twenty-three conferences with visitors in *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* to underwrite, literally as well as figuratively, Wight's positive reception among her neighbors and friends. The interviews show how many and diverse guests, including physicians and ministers who minutely examined her physical and theological condition, were moved to affection and admiration by Wight. The book authorizes Wight's ministry on the one hand by describing and documenting the personal functions and effects of Wight's work within the local community, her ad hoc congregation, and on the other by stamping the community's embrace of her with the imprimatur of scripture.

Moreover, although as far as can be told she returned to her parish church to assume her place within its body as a regular member, Wight also appears to have maintained a special, independent, status as, to apply a revised version Nigel Smith's phrase, an inspired and wise *child-minister* within the local community, to whom many resorted for spiritual advice, fellowship, and solace. This is the most plausible way to understand Jessey's concept of Wight as a "minister to others," because private meetings of laypeople, with or without a formally ordained minister present, held in a domestic setting, for mutual edification, were common among evangelicals of all stripes at this time. There are clues to the fact that Wight's private ministry was no fleeting phenomenon, like the sudden, stellar, and quickly spent reputations of two other mid-century child prophets whose experiences were magnified in printed books, the eleven-year-old Martha Hatfield and the fifteen-year-old Anna Trapnel. One clue to Wight's longevity is the printing in 1656, nine years after her manifestation of grace, of a "pleasant and profitable letter" Wight wrote to an anonymous friend, "expressing the joy [that] is to be had in God in great, long, and sore affliction" (t.p.). This original work of Wight's hand—the only one known to survive—was written on the occasion of Wight's elder stepbrother's death, and allegedly published by one "R.B." without the author's knowledge and consent, suggesting that Wight's name and discourse were still current in wider London, and perhaps even

provincial, evangelical circles.¹⁹ Another clue to Wight's active presence is the continued popularity of Jessey's book, every edition of which prominently displayed the location of her home and parish church to would-be pilgrims, right up until the Restoration, when political forces beyond both Jessey's and Wight's control moved to put an end to sectarianism and independency in religion. As a result, the sort of gatherings around Wight that were depicted in Jessey's book, of persons "over and above those of the same Household," to pray, read, preach, or expound scripture together, were explicitly deemed by the 1664 Conventicle Act as instances of unlawful assembly.²⁰ Taken together, these clues strongly suggest that Wight stayed active and effective as a local itinerant minister well beyond the time of her miraculous recovery, at least until the Restoration, and possibly after.

If we can thus accept as fact the legitimacy of Wight's unorthodox ministry, it remains to consider the grounds of her evangelical power and evidence, as it was experienced by her contemporaries. Such consideration returns us to the difficult question posed by Susan Moore about Wight's case, concerning a child's dramatic leap from inferiority to authority. Moore's suggestion, that in Wight adults appreciated a child's extreme spiritual ingenuousness, and thus perhaps a kind of authenticity or capacity to discover truth,²¹ is a start at an answer. However, this approach doesn't account for the peculiarity of Wight's case in comparison to those of other marvelous children, such as the aforementioned Trapnel and Hatfield. These two were mere prophets: they testified while others listened, observed, located signs of a divine message, and rendered meanings, thus ending the performance, which was short-lived and largely out of the children's hands. Their authority remained negligible at best, and the duration of their interest to others brief. Wight, by contrast, despite her simplicity, administers: her experience and words refresh many sad, troubled disconsolate souls individually, and her activity is, despite Jessey's efforts, self-authorizing. The more Wight comes into contact with others, it seems, the more others want to come into contact with her. Her ministry is the embodiment of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Whereas the child-prophets are merely mediums of a divine message broadcast indiscriminately, Wight the child-minister constitutes a message in herself. And that message, I propose, is herself; or rather, it is her gracefully affecting physical

presence. This was a performance to which Wight's youthfulness certainly contributed. However, it derived its force essentially from the girl's resort to physical gesture, and her manner of conversing with others who, like herself, were unfulfilled by their limited and confusing experience with scripture as text.

Despite its obvious confidence in writing, *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* makes much of embodied communication. It appears that in publishing the book Jessey, who would later pen the landmark *Catechisme for Babes* (1652), deliberately exploited print's potential to "reinvigorate" and inspire oral culture, a process that has been well documented in recent scholarship.²² The majority of Jessey's text is presented as a dialogue, to emphasize speech rather than print. All of Wight's words are printed in italics, to suggest their spoken resonance. Curiously, perhaps, given that Jessey was a Cambridge graduate, a Hebrew scholar who projected a revised translation of the Bible, and was widely recognized for his minute and accurate knowledge of scripture, his book routinely places aspects of concrete physical sensation over metaphysical verbal semiotics. This priority is apparent, for example, in Wight's personal concept of "grace," which is central to both her ministerial rationale and Jessey's attempt to legitimate it. When questioned by a "good *Lady*," a worthy patron of piety, in the company of other such ladies and ministers at Wight's bedside, as to how Wight's spiritual "refreshings" came in to her, whether "by discourse, or in prayer, or how was it," Wight replied, "*By visions of God, as he pleased to come in, filling me with admiration for the free love of God.*" God, Wight said, "*reveal'd to me Jesus Christ crucified for my sinnes, I saw it ...*" (86).²³ The lady next inquired whether because Wight experienced God's love in such manner, does she now "less esteem the written word?" Wight answered, "*The word is the letter of the Spirit, and types out him, therefore not to be the less esteemed*" (86). This reply indicates Wight's general endorsement of the bible; moreover, it coheres with the hermeneutic inclinations of many learned evangelical Protestants of the time, who practiced "typology" as a means of understanding scripture's potential prophetic and allegorical meanings.²⁴ Wight similarly endorsed learned evangelical practice in her response to a question about "the Ordinances"—public religious exercises such as sermons, lectures, fasts, conferences, and communions.

Therefore, despite her own reliance on feelings stimulated by sensory data, Wight clearly esteemed abstract literate knowledge and practice. Yet ultimately, for Wight, literate knowledge alone proved insufficient for the personal experience of grace.

On the same occasion just noted, after the lady had finished her queries, Wight was next approached by Mr. Sprigge, a minister, whose inquiry into the basis of Wight's understanding was more direct. He asked, "which way the Lord came in to refresh you?" Wight said, "*It was revealed to me, that Christ was crucified for me, even for me, the chiefest of sinners. I never had a glimpse of Christ before, and then I admired him. I saw it plainly*" (89). "Plainly" in this instance means directly, by her own physical sense, without the mediation of, say, a literary commonplace, a book, or a learned minister's interpretation. Next Mr. Sprigge, recounting, as Jessey did for readers earlier in the text, that prior to her confinement to bed, Wight "usually every morning ... was wont to read alone above twenty chapters [of the Bible], ... so ... to have stilled her Temptations; but was not a jot the better," asked, "You knew the Scriptures before, that comfort you now: wherein then is your comfort?" Wight answered that "*The Letter did but kill, it could not comfort, but God hath refreshed me in his love. God was the same to me in his love formerly, that he is now. But in the fulnes of time, he manifested that, which was before*" (89). From this particular interview—which is, unlike any other save for a proximate one with Mr. Cogge, a physician, more an examination than a conference, and therefore a set-piece argument in the drama—readers discover that to Wight, God appears as a "manifest" presence, one "plainly" known through the senses, and thereby made evident to the intellect. Scripture, sermons, services, and the like—the stuff of ecclesiastical organization and oversight—are but verbal "similitudes of him," which serve perhaps to prepare tortured souls to apprehend Christ intimately, but which in themselves can neither occasion nor constitute such sensation, which formed the basis of the belief of the people to whom Wight ministered. To this end Wight tells a troubled visitor, tired out by reading and gadding to sermons, "Desire he would but speak the word, and manifest it to your soule" (100). In Wight's understanding of grace, God is manifest as a living, present, and therefore a true, loving, *voice*, seen and heard plainly. In depicting this *The Exceeding Riches of Grace*

reflects a conspicuous division of labor between two sorts of ministry: on the one hand, Wight's own broken- and tender-hearted exchanges with "little ones" in despair of their souls, demonstrating a ministry of mutual intimacy and solace tantamount to "love"; and, on the other, Jessey's massive critical apparatus of scriptural commonplaces, demonstrating a ministry of literate, learned, and comparatively impersonal conviction achieved the via the letter. Whereas through the book Jessey the writer and scholar performs the ministry of the literate learning, composing and scripturally supporting the documentation of Wight's activity, Wight as both a literary and actual phenomenon projects and promotes the ministry of love, of real presence. By virtue of having experienced, through seeing and hearing, the exceeding riches of grace in the flesh, Wight becomes herself graceful: she embodies the gnosis, the grace, of the word in the flesh. Thus the title page proclaims that, "in and by this Earthen Vessell [i.e., Wight]; [the Lord] holds forth his Own eternall love, and the Glorious Grace of his dear Son, to the CHIEFEST of SINNERS."

It is perhaps too easy for us, technologically mature producers and consumers of writing, to appreciate Jessey's ministry, and thus to overlook or undervalue the meaning of Wight's encounters with her little ones. The letter, after all, is what we confront most directly in *The Exceeding Riches of Grace*—not only in the graphic aspect of the book as a material object but also in its text's copious referencing of scripture. In the first edition, Jessey's "Table of the Places of holy Scripture, that in this Book are opened, illustrated, and applied," lists over 180 different chapter-and-verse citations of the bible in what is an 159-page octavo text; the second edition, which appeared only a few weeks after the first, whose title page advertises "added proofs," lists in its table over 280 different places, in a book of identical format and page length. But these reflect Jessey's priorities, of copious and accurate scriptural knowledge and inter-textual reference and documentation of spiritual transactions. By contrast, what seems fundamental to Wight in her relations with her humble and certainly less textually oriented neighbors was sensory data. For immature laypeople such as Wight, in seeking to know God, words alone, no matter their divine inspiration, possessed inherent limitations: as Wight told one maid, "*My earthly tongue cannot express, what I felt, its beyond expression*" (54). In stressing

this aspect of the text I am not arguing that scripture, or writing in general, for that matter, had no place in Wight's ministry, or, by association, in the spiritual life of others like her—to insist on that would contradict the obvious contemporary value of both the printed bible and books such as *The Exceeding Riches of Grace*. Rather, I am suggesting that a religious practice chiefly determined by a literate orientation to knowledge, an alphabetical religion of textual semiotics, so to speak, was for Wight and probably for many of her contemporaries itself inadequate to their need. Scripture was a starting point, the beginning and ground of spiritual life. The full achievement of grace was beyond reading and writing, in the physical sensation of interpersonal reciprocity.²⁵

Sympathetic gesture is Wight's peculiar talent and the basis of her charisma or grace in her contact with her flock. To these seekers she offers no text, no sermon, but feeling itself, in the form of conversation. As Wight told a visitor, "*My tongue was not able to tell the misery I was in before continually and now my tongue is not able to tell what love and mercy hath been shewed to me, I can never enough expresse his Name*" (40–41). Yet she is compelled to speak, despite her own infirmity and the evident deficiency of language. As the various interviews Wight conducts with troubled souls demonstrate, what edifies best is not so much verbal signs of redemption but the immediate exchange of sympathy that physical expressions of comfort make possible. Those to whom Wight administers, principally lost and lonely souls like one whose "heart will not be wrought upon" (76), come not to gawk or witness but to conduct together with Wight an improvised, spontaneous exchange whose verbal contents are less important than the multiple physical sensations evoked by lively conversation. In this manner they feel or imbibe and derive sustenance from Wight, as Wight herself took in Christ. "I am full," Wight had said during her confinement; "*Jesus Christ feeds me,*" despite her refusal of foodstuff (26; 56). "I am not able to express how sweet that word is," Wight explained, of her vision of Christ (30). In imitation of Christ, Wight offers her interlocutors what Jessey described as "*succoring Answers* for upholding and *refreshing [the] weary soule*" (48). She is even able "to put out fit questions" in order to "gain in" upon reticent parties (73). As speech, words in Wight's ministry become significant not as signs

but as sensations, with the potential to relieve the body of the key symptoms of spiritual angst, emptiness and loneliness. In this regard Wight's communicants apprehend her voice "in itself," as the literary critic Roland Barthes has put it, feeling "everything in the voice which overflows [linguistic] meaning."²⁶ The "grain of the voice," says Barthes, can only be described through metaphors, which Jessey attempts to do when he characterizes her speech as "tender-hearted" (p, 28). Elsewhere Jessey notes that Wight's voice was "very low; *and oft whispering, (it could be heard by none, but that were very neer her) uttered in an humble, melting manner, stop'd sometimes with teares or sighs* (3). By these approximate verbal means the text signifies the palpable sustaining pleasure or *jouissance* of actual conversation with Sarah Wight.

Another dimension of the extra-linguistic aspect of Wight's discursive ministrations is her physical bearing or deportment. In *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* readers find Wight performing a subtle manipulation of the complex "politics of touch and openness," both in her habit of receiving guests in her bedchamber and her mode of addressing and speaking with them.²⁷ Throughout the early modern period, much as today, one's social respectability and integrity depended in part on the defense of personal space as a dimension of social identity. By surrendering nearly all of this space, exposing herself to neighbors and strangers alike in a highly private location, Wight made herself unusually accessible to others. In her sickbed, appearing weak, vulnerable, and insignificant—the "empty nothing creature" of the book's title—Wight was able to take in those who believed, as she herself once did, that they are the chief of sinners, and therefore alone in the world. Further, by engaging and holding the lonely in dialogue, Wight was able to express sympathy and thereby offer solace. Consider for instance the following excerpt of a conversation Wight had with a "maid" who came to her, "*in deep despair*":

Maid. I am without God, an enemy to him.

S. Well, let it be so, you are without God in the world, a stranger, an enemy: yet such hath he reconciled by the death of his Son: all the want is, you cannot see it.

...

Maid. But I have rejected him.

S. You can do nothing else, but reject him: but your greatest rejecting is, to reject a promise from God when he holds one out to you, then you say, it is not to me. Thus I find, as you do, in rejecting promises, and that was my greatest sin.

Maid. Your sin was not like mine.

S. No sin was like mine, as I judged. Mine was against such light, that I judged I had sinned against the Holy Ghost.

Maid. That word terrifies me, that was said to me, Repentance is hid from thine eyes.

S. That word when I read it, I was ready to tear it out of my book. There were three other Scriptures that were terrible to me. He that believes not, is condemned already, was one: Another was, He that believeth not the Son,—the wrath of God abides in him. A third was, He that made them, will not have mercy on them: no mercy, none at all. But above all this, Repentance is hid from mine eyes.

Maid. Was it so with you? And then said, The Discoveries of Christ, and promises, are more terrible to me, then the curses of the Law.

S. Sometimes it was so with me; salvation was turned into condemnation to me: promises that were ever so sweet, were terrible to me. (105–107)

Perhaps the most remarkable detail in this passage is the terror scripture produced in both girls: this is not the way we have been led by our study of early modern evangelical commentary to think of scripture's function. But is easy to imagine how a simplistic, too literal interpretation could result in such an effect, which would only be amplified were one to read by oneself, in relative isolation, or in the company of other unsophisticated students—those who are “children” in understanding, if not in years, who read, as Jessey explained of Wight's own early unfortunate study of scripture, “not aright.” Apparently the terror was so extreme that whoever felt it could only imagine herself alone in torment, suffering the desperate fate of the chiefest of sinners. That is one way to grasp what Wight may have intended by her use of the trope, “the letter did but kill, it could not comfort,” in response to the lady questioner quoted previously. In any case, to sufferers of

despair, Wight could offer tangible, credible sympathy, having herself directly experienced both the terror and the deliverance. In this exchange, which is typical, the maid insists at first that Wight is “not like” her. But Wight works to, as contemporary evangelicals would have put it, ‘open’ and ‘melt’ the resistant conviction of her conversant. The maid’s question, “was it so with you?” may be read as a sign of her surprise and relief to find in Wight another person who felt what she had been feeling. It is an opening, a crevice, through which Wight seeps in. If to describe the relation Wight establishes here as “communion” stretches the limits of plausible interpretation, at least we can observe that the maid now begins to find her isolation less extreme. The conversation draws to a close thus:

Maid. If I could weep day and night, I should find some ease, but I cannot.

S. What if you could! Yet the Law and all your doings are weak; but you have not what you would in your selfe, that you must not rest short of Christ. You would not else desire the riches of Grace to such a one. Are you not weary and sorrowfull?

Maid. I am.

S. He will satiate the weary soul: and he will replenish the sorrowfull soule.

The maid having further heard by this Gentlewoman, how sad her condition had been; and that yet the Lord had been so gracious to her, shee said: Mine was not sadder than yours hath been: but onely that I had sinned against greater light. How long were you in that sad condition?

S. Four yeeres and above, since I was little more then eleven yeeres old: But the last half yeer and above before the Lord delivered me, I was full of terror night and day; and at last, I had no rest at all, being violently tempted against my life.

Maid. Then I may have some hope that the Lord may deliver me; because I have not been above two moneths so violently troubled. (112–113)

Wight’s sympathy is not the antidote to physical torment—only Christ can provide that remedy. Indeed, the maid departs from the

interview still somewhat self-obsessed, deriving hope from a precise comparison of the duration of her own trouble with that of Wight, which keeps the two personalities conceptually apart and neglects the more fundamental feeling of affiliation Wight attempted to establish. Nevertheless, in their exchange Wight has performed a meaningful ministerial function, offering her interlocutor a kind of “succor,” in the form of real presence, that a book is unable to provide such persons, no matter how long they stay with it. In fact, the reciprocal sympathetic feeling that Wight extends to her guest can only be achieved in the flesh, between one body and another, and never from an inanimate object such as a book. Likewise, the achievement of grace is an effect of animate gesture, whether real, as in what Wight administered directly to others, or imaginary, as in what Wight felt Christ administered to her, when he showed her “*a glimpse of his love*,” in which Wight “*saw myself crucified with Christ, that my sins pierced him ...*” (53–54). Touch, reciprocal sympathy, the palpable grain of the voice, not only or even primarily the letter, is the medium and bond of communion among godly people such as these.

In yet another and perhaps the most decisive repetition of embodied communication, *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* presents the example of Sarah Wight herself, a lonely child surrounded by family, friends, neighbors, ministers, and others seeking to comfort her, but with whose love she was unable to connect or, in the language of the text, “refresh” herself. In fact, ashamed of her own loveless and apparently forsaken condition, she strove to remove herself further from others’ affection, in several suicide attempts. On sending herself into convulsions with the last suicidal gesture, she found herself confined in a bedroom that became a kind of laboratory of love, in which Wight was convinced, through the exchange of sympathetic gesture with the hundreds who visited her, that she was capable of being loved, and of giving love in return. Arguably the most compelling instance of these convincing exchanges was the first one to occur after Wight regained consciousness, between the daughter and her mother, whom, let us recall, Wight had deceived and sinned against. Mentally alert, but still blind and deaf, Wight commenced to murmur of pardon, and called for her mother, “to testifie that shee had pardond” her daughter. Mary Wight then

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came to her, and took her daughters hand, and put it on her own neck, where her daughter felt a skare that was there, through the enemy: whereby her daughter knowing her, cast her head into her mothers bosome, and wept greatly, and kissed her, and stroaked her face, and said, *I know you mother; and I love you with another love then I loved you before.* (24–25)

The visitation of Christ that occurred two months after this exchange can be taken as a psychic reenactment and confirmation of this decisive moment, in which a troubled girl received sympathy from the body best able to offer it. The affiliation felt between Mary and Sarah Wight through this gesture is manifest, not abstract, since the sign that Wight knew her mother by was a scar made “by the enemy,” meaning that it was the physical trace of the mother’s own desperate, self-destructive response to isolation. They possessed more than genealogy in common. The recognition of this common possession, and the genuine, spontaneous feeling of love it produced, reversed Wight’s determination to destroy her body and set in motion a process of bodily attention that led to its full recovery and an appreciation of its capacity to heal others. The stream of bedside visitors in the interim, between the mother’s touch and the visitation of Christ, served merely to reinforce the sensation of love achieved by this initial sympathetic gesture.

Given all *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* makes available to us, which I have lightly touched on here, it is unreasonable to assert that because she was a child, Sarah Wight possessed an inherent capacity or advantage for sympathetic gesture. If anything, we might presume that a body lacking the kind of self-knowledge characteristic of intellectual maturity would be incapable of the genuinely sympathetic expression published in Jessey’s book. It is probable, therefore, that Wight’s childhood finally terminated in her newfound capacity for sympathetic gesture. In this regard, Jessey’s learned literate writing proves to be less exact than modern scholarship demands, as his use of the word “child” to describe Wight does not do justice to the level of spiritual and psychological understanding her actions demonstrate. But to be fair, monitoring the limits of childhood was not Jessey’s chief concern in composing the book. Jessey presented Wight’s case in the manner of sacred biography, a literate instrument to construct and certify a holy

person's corporeal charisma. As I hope to have shown, for sophisticated readers such as ourselves it succeeds brilliantly in this objective. For Wight, and for other spiritually immature contemporaries as she was, the book may have been treated as merely a record of events and feelings that transpired by other means than reading and writing. *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* displays a system of power and knowledge ideally suited to children in years and understanding—people whose knowledge of or faith in the letter is limited, and inadequate to their spiritual and physical needs.

Notes

1. For a recent account of both views, see Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford, 2002), Chapter 1.
2. According to Ian Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2000), 416, there were about nine editions in twenty years.
3. The full title is *The exceeding Riches of GRACE ADVANCED By the Spirit of Grace, in an Empty Nothing Creature, viz. M^{tris} SARAH WIGHT, Lately hopeles and restles, her soule dwelling as far from Peace or hopes of Mercy, as ever was any. Now hopefull, and joyfull in the LORD, that hath caused LIGHT to shine out of DARKNESS; that in and by this Earthen Vessell, holds forth his Own eternall love, and the Glorious Grace of his dear Son, to the CHIEFEST of SINNERS. Who desired that others might hear and know, what the LORD hath done for her soul, (that was so terrified day & night:) and might neither presume, nor despair and murmure against God, as shee hath done[.]* Published for the Refreshing of poor souls, by an Eye and Ear-witness of a good part thereof, HENRY JESSE, a servant of Jesus Christ. London, 1647. Subsequent citations of this text will appear in parenthesis in the body of the paper.
4. Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999), Chapter 4, esp. 212–213.
5. Among works of its kind, only Philip Stubbes's *A Christal Glasse for Christian Women*, his verbatim account of the last dying words of his wife Katherine, first published in 1591, was more popular, appearing in an estimated thirty editions to the end of the seventeenth century.
6. For an overview, see Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1992).
7. Nigel Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed: Language and Literature in English Radical Religion 1640–1660* (Oxford, 1989), 46.
8. Barbara Ritter Dailey, "The Visitation of Sarah Wight: Holy Carnival and the Revolution of the Saints in Civil War London," *Church History* 55 (1986), 438; but compare the reading of Carol Scott-Lukens, who finds in Jesse's text "convincing evidence of an evolving 'female' tradition of *ars moriendi*," in Carola Scott-Luckens, "Propaganda or Marks of Grace?"

- The Impact of the Reported Ordeals of Sarah Wight in Revolutionary London, 1647–52,” *Women’s Writing*, 9 (2002), 223.
9. Katharine Gillespie, *Domesticity and Dissent in the Seventeenth Century: English Women Writers and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, 2004), 191.
 10. Susan Hardman Moore, “Such Perfecting of Praise Out of the Mouth of a Babe’: Sara Wight as Child Prophet,” in *The Church and Childhood*, ed. Diana Wood (Oxford, 1994), 314, 323. For other studies of early modern child prophets, see Nigel Smith, “A Child Prophet: Martha Hatfield as *The Wise Virgin*,” in *Children and Their Books: A Celebration of the Work of Iona and Peter Opie*, eds. Gillian Avery and Julia Briggs (Oxford, 1989), 79–93; Alexandra Walsham, “Out of the Mouths of Babes and Sucklings’: Prophecy, Puritanism, and Childhood in Elizabethan Suffolk,” in *The Church and Childhood*, 285–299. For related studies, see J. A. Sharpe, “Disruption in the Well-Ordered Household: Age, Authority, and Possessed Young People,” in *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England*, eds. Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox, and Steve Hindle (New York, 1996), 187–212; Elizabeth A. Foyster, “Silent Witnesses? Children and the Breakdown of Domestic and Social Order in Early Modern England,” in *Childhood in Question: Children, Parents, and the State*, Anthony Fletcher and Stephen Hussey, eds. (Manchester and New York, 1999), 57–73.
 11. Keith Thomas, “Age and Authority in Early Modern England,” *Proceedings of the British Academy*, LXII (1977), 225. For the delayed age of maturity, see 221ff.
 12. For examples, see Ian Green, *The Christian’s ABC: Catechisms and Catechizing in England c.1530–1740* (Oxford, 1996).
 13. John Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair* (Oxford, 1991), 42.
 14. Anne Laurence, “A Priesthood of She-Believers: Women and Congregations in Mid-Seventeenth-Century England,” in *Women in the Church*, W. J. Shiels and Diana Wood, eds. (Oxford, 1990), 359.
 15. Laurence, “Women and Congregations,” 363. For a historical consideration of the role of women in Baptist congregations, including that of Henry Jessey, see B.R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (Didcot, 1996), Chapter 4, especially 145–155.
 16. Wrigley and Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541–1871* (London, 1981) 218.
 17. Thomas, “Age and Authority,” 209.
 18. Keith Thomas, “Children in Early Modern England,” in *Children and Their Books*, ed. Avery and Briggs, 45–77.
 19. *A Wonderful Pleasant and Profitable Letter Written by Mrs Sarah Wight, To a Friend* (London, 1656). Dailey, “Visitation of Sara Wight,” 453, speculates that R.B. is Robert Bacon, a religious radical.
 20. Patrick Collinson, “The English Conventicle,” in *Voluntary Religion*, W. J. Shiels and Diana Wood, eds. (Oxford, 1986), 223.
 21. In “A Child Prophet,” 85, Smith finds that the Hatfield case is “an early Puritan version of the later and more widespread attitude that the innocence of children gives them a special insight into reality.” Lorraine Daston

has argued that the “purity” of innocence was essential to the distinction between the evidence of “true” and “false” miracles during the first half of the seventeenth century, see Lorraine Daston, “Marvelous Facts and Miraculous Evidence in Early Modern Europe,” in *Wonders, Marvels, and Monsters in Early Modern Europe*, Peter G. Platt, ed. (Newark, 1999), 92–93.

22. On the “dynamic continuum” of oral and literate culture, see Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in Early Modern England 1500–1700* (Oxford, 2000), p. 50, *passim*; on Jessey as catechist, see Barbara Ritter Dailey, “Youth and the New Jerusalem: The English Catechistical Tradition and Henry Jessey’s *Catechism for Babes* (1652),” *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 30 (1982), 25–54.
23. Vision is the principal means of apprehension. To another on an earlier occasion she explained that “Jesus Christ was presented to me, as crucified for my sins. I saw it: and my selfe crucified with him: and when I saw a glimpse of his love, then I mourned bitterly for my sins ...” (54). Cf. 53, 67.
24. Thomas M. Davis, “The Traditions of Puritan Typology,” in *Typology and Early American Literature*, Sacvan Berkovitch, ed. (Amherst, MA, 1972), 11–45.
25. In her essay, “‘Communion of the Saints’: Spiritual Reciprocity and the Godly Community in Early Modern England,” *Albion*, 27 (1995), 19–41, Diane Willen describes how “spiritual relationships based on strong emotional bonds” (p. 23) were established and maintained among the learned gentry through epistolary exchange. The habit Willen describes represents the attempt to employ the novel technology of letter-writing to accomplish the effects of what had thus far been an embodied practice.
26. Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980*, tr. Linda Coverdale (Berkeley, 1991), 183–184.
27. Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven and London, 2003), Chapter 2.