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‘Prolixity is a Woman’s Crime’: Assessing Long-windedness in Seventeenth-century Women’s Writing

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Abstract

Gendered critiques of language have long been a feature of written discourse, and perhaps in no era more tellingly than the seventeenth century, a period in which female writers came to the fore and told their stories for the very first time. Through an examination of *This is a Short Relation of Some of the Cruel Sufferings (For the Truth’s Sake) of Katherine Evans and Sarah Cheevers* (1662) and Mary Trye’s 1675 treatise *Medicatrix*, this essay explores the assumption that women’s writing is long-winded. Assessing their religious, medical and even proto-feminist messages, the essay analyses rhetorical devices and their effect, and how context heavily influenced the length of each publication. More than an historical record of their struggle, these texts articulate the voices of women previously unheard. While the two texts would seem at odds, the former concerning Quakerism and the latter medicine, they prove comparable in all their contrasts, revealing how women during this period of history displayed extraordinary innovation in their writing.

Keywords

Katherine Evans, Sarah Cheevers, Mary Trye, autobiography, inquisition, missionaries

Mary Trye, in her little-known treatise of 1675, *Medicatrix: or the Woman Physician*, provocatively states that ‘prolixity is a woman’s crime’.¹ While gendered critiques

1 Trye, M., *Medicatrix or the Woman-Physician*, London: T.R & N.T., 1675, Early English Books Online.

of language have long been a feature of written discourse, there is an overarching notion that endures even to this day: the sexist adage that women are prolix, that they employ flowery language and take far too long to reach their point. At face value, this would seem to be the single connection that could be made between pamphlets as diverse as Trye's *Medicatrix* and the 1662 work *This is a Short Relation of Some of the Cruel Sufferings (for the Truth's Sake) of Katherine Evans and Sarah Cheevers*.² Yet, as this essay will go on to argue, assessing a text's length and the reasons behind its lengthiness provides a fascinating insight into the autobiographical tradition.

According to Sarah Apetrei and Hannah Smith, the seventeenth century 'provided women with a new cultural legitimacy', an emancipatory revolution in the wake of the English civil war of 1642–51.³ While Trye asserts that it is 'little of Novelty to see a Woman in Print', female publications were in the minority and this is perhaps why women of the period chose to write so much.⁴ While *Medicatrix* was written in response to Henry Stubbe's *Campanella Revived*, a text disparaging Trye's late father's capability as a physician, *A Short Relation* is broader in its scope, relating the three years of suffering its authors endured at the hands of the Maltese inquisition.⁵ Though both texts are irrefutably long, they are crucially important to the study of seventeenth-century literature in that they help to uncover the radical and reactionary lives of women during one of the most contentious periods of British history.

For the theorist Joan Kelly-Gadol, an analysis of literary culture during this century inevitably raises the question: 'did women have a renaissance?'⁶ Certainly, for scholars of the period pamphlets such as *A Short Relation* were 'unprecedented', corroborating how, as Quakers, Evans and Cheevers were endowed with rights and privileges simply not afforded women of other religious groups during the 1600s.⁷ While the Friends emphasise spiritual equality between the sexes, gender and representations of it are apparent throughout the text.⁸ In adherence to David Norbrook's suggestion that women 'assumed ... certain spheres of discourse were universal', their 'short' relation is over a hundred pages long, demonstrating how Quakerism gave these women a voice, without which they may have been just

2 Evans, K. and Cheevers, S., *This is a Short Relation of Some of the Cruel Sufferings (for the Truth's Sake) of Katherine Evans and Sarah Cheevers, In the Inquisition in the Isle of Malta*, London: Robert Wilson, 1662, Early English Books Online.

3 Searle, A., 'Women, Marriage and Agency in Restoration Dissent', in Apetrei, Sarah, and Smith, Hannah (eds), *Religion and Women in Britain c.1660–1760*, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 24.

4 Trye, *Medicatrix*, p. i.

5 Stubbe, H., *Campanella Revived*, London: Printed for the Author, 1670, Early English Books Online.

6 Wiseman, S., *Conspiracy and Virtue: women, writing, and politics in seventeenth-century England*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 11.

7 Gill, C. and Hobby, E., *This I Warn You in Love*, London: The Kindlers, 2013, p. 9.

8 'George Fox', *Oxford DNB*, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/> [accessed 16/05/20].

another two prisoners of an estimated 70,000–100,000 held in the name of the Inquisition.⁹

Evans and Cheevers operate a prolix rhetoric, serving to redefine the female archetype: 'My Dear Husband, my love, my life is given up to serve the living God, and to obey his pure Call in the measure of the manifestation of his love.'¹⁰ While letters to husbands would seem irrelevant at surface value, they go some way to resolve the contentious question: to whom do women owe the greatest obedience? Beginning the letter in such a way exemplifies Cheevers' prioritisation of God over domestic responsibility, pointing to the forthright attitudes of Quaker missionaries. Justifying her behaviour, Cheevers shifts potential criticism away from herself by making explicit the devotion of her life to God's higher purpose. While the contemporary Thomas Collier described Quaker writing as 'filthyness, pride and abomination', Cheevers' eloquence and integrity epitomises her revaluation of the definitions that seek to bind and enclose her, providing a counter-narrative to the hitherto unchallenged prolixity of the male story.¹¹

Mary Trye too engages in this process of rewriting. Though it would seem she seeks to separate herself from her fellow women in her assessment of 'prolixity', she, by mistake or intention, participates in the 'crime'. Throughout *Medicatrix*, Trye holds contradictory assessments of the female sex. On the one hand, she is self-deprecating of her writing: 'Although I dare not pretend to be so much a linguist, or capable of such great studies';¹² yet, on the other, she is staunch in her vindication of equality: 'I am satisfied there is Ability enough in my sex, both to discourse his envy, and equal to the arguments of his pen.'¹³ Here, Trye's oscillation between proto-feminism and self-criticism characterises the instability of gender definitions after the English Civil War, contradictions which inevitably result in lengthy discourse.

Stylistically, these declarative sentences function as asides, separate to and independent from Trye's primary aim, 'intended as both a vindication and a challenge' of Henry Stubbe.¹⁴ Yet to assume that Trye is prolix by virtue of her sex is to severely underestimate her. Through these very contradictions, Trye uses gender to her advantage. In both asserting and negating, Trye's prolixity broadens her audience and limits potential criticism of her testimony. In proclaiming her imperfections, Trye criticises her own writing before any male reader can, forming a narrative space for herself insofar as was possible during the seventeenth century.

9 John Edwards, *The Spanish Inquisition*, Stroud: Tempus, 1999, p. 88.

10 Evans and Cheevers, *A Short Relation*, p. 56.

11 Gill, C., 'Identities in Quaker Women's Writing, 1652–60', *Women's Writing* 9 (2002), p. 274.

12 Trye, *Medicatrix*, p. 4.

13 Trye, *Medicatrix*, p. 2.

14 Linden, S. J., 'Mrs Mary Trye, *Medicatrix*: Chemistry and Controversy in Restoration England', *Women's Writing* 1 (1994), p. 342.

What becomes clear from this, and from other female texts of the same period, is the relationship between writing and the performance of power. As the writers make the case within their pamphlets, nothing is more powerful or permissible than truth itself. For both texts, ‘the truth’s sake’ is less a choice than it is a necessity, undermining the misconception that women deal only in the realm of fancy.¹⁵ According to Megan Matchinske, early modern women’s writing is characterised by ‘the Aristotelian belief that what renders us human is our shared view on matters of good and evil’, revealing the moralistic agenda of contemporary discourse.¹⁶ Within both *A Short Relation* and *Medicatrix*, this theme of truth and justice is pervasive, typified by their condemnation of all that is evil and untrue, whether that be in the form of a single man or an entire system of belief.

As the text’s very justification, *A Short Relation* makes the case for truthfulness. Evans and Cheevers first establish the authority of their voices—essential if they are to be trusted—through inverting the religious belief universally accounted for as fact. The opening of *A Short Relation* is pioneering: ‘Glory be given to our Lord God for ever [...] who hath counted us worthy, and hath chosen among his faithful ones, to bear his name and to witness forth his truth.’¹⁷ Much like Daniel Baker in ‘The Dedicatory Epistle’, the writers question the authority of Eve’s fall in Genesis: the cornerstone of female subservience within the religious community.¹⁸ Here, Evans and Cheevers refute those who would condemn their speech to the realm of impropriety, using their story and salvation as a vindication of ‘his truth’. Using God as their mouthpiece, the writers legitimise their speech, for it is His message, His Light that seeks to liberate them from the chains of Iniquity.

Mary Trye also defends her lengthiness by emphasising the truth of her writing. Portraying Henry Stubbe as a charlatan—‘he will be so kind to excuse me for the vacancy of those Masculine Capacities he himself glories in ... such fine things, as are prettily term’d Philosophical in him, will scarce be thought rational in mine’—Trye undercuts him in various ways.¹⁹ Portraying him as a rhetorician of ‘fine things’, Trye disparages men of letters, ‘positioning’, as Sara Read makes the case, ‘Stubbe as a dealer in words [rather than] “matter”’, for as she claimed herself earlier within the pamphlet, prolixity is none other than a woman’s crime.²⁰ Conveying her version of the truth (truth learned through experience), Trye

15 Evans and Cheevers, *A Short Relation*, Title Page.

16 Matchinske, M., ‘When We Swear to Tell the Truth: the Carelton Debates and archival methodology’, in Phillippy, P. (ed.), *A History of Early Modern Women’s Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 85–6.

17 Evans and Cheevers, *A Short Relation*, p. 1.

18 Evans and Cheevers, *A Short Relation*, p. iv.

19 Trye, *Medicatrix*, p. 5.

20 Read, S., ‘My Method and Medicines: Mary Tyre, Chemical Physician’, *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 11 (2006), p. 142.

counteracts the legitimacy of Stubbe's claims from the very beginning, undoing the writer of *Campanella Revived* as both a physician and a man of truth.

A linguistic analysis reveals further insights into this era of female autobiography. For all their discrepancies in genre and formal elements, *Medicatrix* and *A Short Relation* follow a pattern ubiquitous to women's writing of the seventeenth century. From the very title page, these writers engage in a rhetoric of self-justification, an eccentric meta-language revealing the patriarchal mentality at the era's core. From the 'Dedicatory Epistle' of Trye to the opening of Evans and Cheevers' text, justification becomes inevitably bound up with self-protection, providing a revealing insight into female authorship.

For Evans and Cheevers, *A Short Relation* constitutes a justification of their missionary work: the sheer fact that they were released from Malta authenticates their faith in God and, for this essay's purpose, their writing. Yet, while Mary Trye's account served her own and her late father's interests, *A Short Relation* was designed to benefit the entire Quaker community, and it is for this reason that the editing procedure must be taken into consideration. According to Wiseman, spiritual writing of the era can be categorised into 'three stages: the "event" ... the women's narratives; their Restoration editing ... at each stage the "meanings" of the event are changed'.²¹ Structurally, *A Short Relation* adheres to these classifications, causing us to ask how much of a voice Evans and Cheevers had in the publication of their own story. The notion that prolixity is a woman's crime holds water only if the text was written predominantly by women. Statistically speaking, 22.3 per cent of the text of *A Short Relation* is written by men, made up of 'The Epistle to a Reader' and letters of the editor, Daniel Baker, along with his translated warrant of their arrest, written by a presumably male member of the Maltese Inquisition. While *A Short Relation* is long, the extent to which we can align this with gender is problematic if we are to consider its male editorial choices. In order to present Quakerism as a religion to be followed and admired, it had to adhere to the editing stages Wiseman alludes to; it had to, in one form or another, appertain to contemporary notions of femininity.

Self-protection can be further aligned with prolixity in *Medicatrix*. In vindicating the life of her father, Thomas O'Dowde, Tyre simultaneously vindicates her own. When she describes her father's work in plague-ravaged London, writing: 'these things were not more than his Duty, and the Duty of every honest and faithful subject', she aligns herself with these very same values—'duty' to her father, to her role as a physician, and to herself as a woman sidelined by the medical practitioners of the era.²² Though Trye makes the rhetorical jibe 'say 'tis pity to disturb their Ashes', Stubbe's disturbance in the form of *Campanella Revived* has far-reaching implications, not only for her father's ashes but for her position and reputation as

21 Wiseman, S., *Conspiracy and Virtue: women, writing, and politics in seventeenth-century England*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 278.

22 Trye, *Medicatrix*, p. 29.

a physician.²³ Prolixity in this instance is justified, for it is her long-windedness that maintains her economic security: if her father's methods come under censure, so will her own. Trye's 'Revival of Mr O'Dowdes Medicines', along with eight pages of his 'Advertisements', give credence to such a view, demonstrating how prolixity is bound up in not only protection of the self but protection of the family that constitutes it.²⁴

It comes as no surprise, therefore, when both texts employ the language of the dominant speaker. Much like notions of the subaltern in post-colonial studies, the women of these texts evoke classical subjects through language and metaphor: prolix additions typical of seventeenth-century male discourse. For the critic Stanton J. Linden, Trye's argument is undermined by her 'absurd identification of Stubbe with Cicero'.²⁵ Over four pages of Section I, Trye aligns Henry Stubbe with the Roman statesman before apologising to her reader—'but I have been much longer on this parallel than I intended'—only to continue in her assessment for three pages more.²⁶ Certainly, this section would adhere to her notion that prolixity is a woman's crime, but, then again, we cannot ignore her sarcasm. Perhaps, as may have been the case, Trye simply articulated the voice of those men who would condemn her testimony as a work of female sensationalism?

Yet the notion that Trye's entire writing style is mere caricature is a tad overreaching. As Apetrei and Smith make the case, women's language of the seventeenth century was 'shaped by their own, and others, conception of gendered norms'.²⁷ In an attempt to invert such assumptions assigned her gender, Trye's classical allusions epitomise a desire to project her intelligence and be taken seriously by the medical community. Yet, for Wiseman, these references are not only a marker of education but a component of Restoration genre *per se*. As she goes on to argue, classicism 'bears the moral and historical authority of antiquity' and is a linguistic mechanism used by women of the period to claim authority on their own terms.²⁸ While we can censure Trye for her assumption of the language of the 'learned, learned' she so disparages, this must be seen in the context of the period; Mary Trye simply used the methods available to her.²⁹

Evans and Cheevers' *A Short Relation* also makes lengthy classical references, albeit to differing effect. As a religious pamphlet printed with the aim of spreading the Quaker message, what may be considered prolix is in fact a message saturated with religious politicisation. Biblical allusion is sustained for over two pages in one section of the text: 'And in the time of our great trial The sun was darkened, the moon was

23 Trye, *Medicatrix*, p. 23.

24 Trye, *Medicatrix*, p. 70.

25 Linden, 'Mrs Mary Trye: *Medicatrix*', p. 343.

26 Trye, *Medicatrix*, p. 15.

27 Apetrei, S. and Smith, H., 'Introduction', in Apetrei, S. and Smith, H. (eds), *Religion and Women in Britain c.1660–1760*, London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 20–21.

28 Wiseman, *Conspiracy and Virtue*, p. 52.

29 Trye, *Medicatrix*, p. 13.

turned into blood and the stars did fall from heaven and there was great tribulation ten days, such as never was from the beginning of the world [Rev. 6.12–13].³⁰ Here, the factual narrative takes a metaphorical turn demonstrative of the biblical stature of their suffering. Aligning the Holy Roman Inquisition with Babylon, the writers exhibit the injustice of Catholicism, illustrating once more how the personal and political are forever bound when it comes to women's writing of this period.³¹ For Gill and Hobby, every pamphlet published by Quaker women set a precedent, enabling the writers to develop new methods of writing. Framing the Bible to their purpose was one such technique, and here, in this section of *A Short Relation*, we can see this taking place in ways both 'inclusive and enabling'.³² Relating their story to the fall of Babylon, Evans and Cheevers not only condemn the Holy Roman Inquisition but stipulate that it shall soon be destroyed by true believers, further promoting Quakerism to the reading public.

It is also worth considering how the nature of autobiography relates to a text's perceived lengthiness. As is typical of Quaker publications, emphasis is placed upon the individual's suffering: 'The physician was in a great rage at Sarah, because she could not bow to him, but to God only.'³³ Abiding with the autobiographical structure of the pamphlet, their narrative provides 'proof positive' of their religious message appertaining to the characteristics of religious publications.³⁴ Here, Sarah's refusal to bow in the name of Catholicism personifies the spiritual equality of Quaker doctrine.³⁵ Wiseman's suggestion that martyr narratives are 'reshaped with the emphasis shifted from law to the pain of the private citizen' is worth exploring here.³⁶ Shifting focus away from the physician and friar, towards Sarah herself, she assumes aspects of the body politic representative of her religious group as a collective. Transforming an autobiographical text to one charged with politicism, *A Short Relation* becomes symbolic not only of Evans and Cheevers' struggle against religious sectarianism but of the entire Quaker community at home and abroad.

A Short Relation and *Medicatrix* both appeal to and reject Trye's assessment that women's writing is characterised by 'prolixity'. Their texts, though long, seldom recess into irrelevance, and, though comprised of vested interests, rarely stray from truth. In articulating the lives of contemporary women, their work transcends mere stylistic concerns, characterising, as David Norbrook suggests, 'a period of extraordinary energy and creativity'.³⁷ In committing the crime of prolixity,

30 Evans and Cheevers, *A Short Relation*, p. 123.

31 "Babylon," *Oxford Reference*, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/> [accessed 21/05/20].

32 Gill and Hobby, *This I Warn You in Love*, p. 16.

33 Evans and Cheevers, *A Short Relation*, p. 123.

34 Gill, 'Identities in Quaker Women's Writing, 1652–60', p. 274.

35 'Society of Friends', *Oxford Reference*, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/> [accessed 22/05/20].

36 Wiseman, *Conspiracy and Virtue*, p. 287.

37 Norbrook quoted in Searle, 'Women, Marriage, and Agency', p. 24.

Trye, Evans and Cheevers embody generations of female silence, the effects of which laid the foundations for female authorship, the reverberations of which are being felt to this day.

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