A “REMARKABLE FEMALE OF WOMANKIND”: GENDER, SCRIPTURE, AND KNOWLEDGE IN THE WRITINGS OF M. MARSIN

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Between 1694 and 1701, a woman of some means produced at least fifteen (self-funded) theological tracts, many of which appeared in two or more editions, and some of which exceeded one hundred pages in length. Few other seventeenth-century women writers published more than ten times in their lifetime. Even the celebrated Mary Astell was less prolific. The reflections of this theologian, located in the contemporary discourses of both millenarian mysticism and advocacy for women, are illustrative of the dynamic religious and literary context of the 1690s. Yet “M. Marsin” (whose full name is unknown) remains one of the least discussed female figures of the period. Fortunately, she has been rescued from oblivion in recent years by William E. Burns, Tim Hitchcock, and Christopher Hill, who have provided much of the groundwork for further research and have demonstrated the significance and exceptionality of her work.

Marsin’s literary career did not begin in 1683, as the Wing Short Title Catalogue indicates. The unfortunate confusion of the anonymous satire *The Women’s Advocate, or, Fifteen Real Comforts of Matrimony*, published in that year, with her 1697 *Womans Advocate* has carried over to various catalogues. Burns has drawn attention to the absurdity of the attribution, and the most cursory comparison of the bawdy humour of the 1683 *Women’s Advocate* and Marsin’s earnest prose confirms his point. In fact, Marsin began to write in 1694, following a series of earthquakes

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1 See bibliography.
2 Famous exceptions include Aphra Behn, Margaret Cavendish, Eleanor Davies, Margaret Fell, Elinor James, Jane Lead, Dorothy White, and Hannah Woolley.
and volcanic explosions which had shaken the territories of South Italy in the previous year, and the island of Jamaica in June 1692. It was perhaps in the year 1693, following the dissemination of this news, that she made her decision to travel to London. Her starting point is impossible to know, as the only indication she gives of her origin is the vaguest radius from the capital. In 1697 she describes how “I did dare do no other then leave and venture the little concern I had, and come about a Hundred Miles to acquaint the Nation, what God is a going to do”.

The reports from Jamaica and Italy—particularly those relating to volcanic activity, which seemed to her to portend the opening of hell—convinced M. Marsin of the imminent second coming of Christ. She came to believe that this would be precipitated by the opening of the “sealed book” of Revelation 5, which implied a full and definitive exposition of Scripture (her own). There were a number of points which required clarification to reach this perfect synthesis, including the obscure “figurative speeches” which dealt with the status of the Jews in salvation history, the Holy Spirit, predestination, and other eschatological paradigms. Her views on some of these questions evolved over time, as autograph corrections on her publications indicate. As Marsin’s millennial expectations heightened, so did her understanding of her role as herald of the truth. She defended in radical terms her claim to a unique and almost prophetic dispensation as a woman and argued from Scripture the possibility of such a vocation for others of her sex. While her prose is often impenetrable and turgid, at intervals Marsin fires the imagination with her humanity, her audacity, her eccentricity, and her advocacy for her sex.

Yet her profile is still strikingly absent from the usual canons of early modern women writers: notably the Brown University Women Writers Project, but also the massive anthological literature of recent years.

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4 All the Chief Points Contained in the Christian Religion (1697), 16.
5 Marsin understood the eruptions of Vesuvius to be physical manifestations of hellfire, a notion perhaps derived from Henry More, who expected that the earth would be consumed by a conflagration at the end of time, precipitated by volcanic and subterranean fires. See An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness (Cambridge, 1660), 238–40.
6 See for example the Bodleian copy of This Treatise Proving Three Worlds (1696), 8º Y 35 Th., in which Marsin modified her doctrine of election in a brief note below the Advertisement.
7 Some recent examples include James Fitzmaurice et al., eds., Major Women Writers of Seventeenth-Century England (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Randall