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# Leveller Women Petitioners and the Rhetoric of Power in the English Revolution (1640-1660)

Claire GHEERAERT-GRAFFEUILLE\*

## RÉSUMÉ

*Cette étude met en évidence l'influence paradoxale de quelques femmes proches du mouvement niveleur sur la vie politique anglaise au milieu du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Elle repose sur une étude rhétorique des pétitions qu'elles ont envoyées au Parlement en 1649, en 1651 et en 1653, afin d'exiger la libération de leurs maris emprisonnés. Ce corpus montre leur parfaite connaissance de leurs droits en tant que citoyennes, leur utilisation stratégique d'une rhétorique de la compassion afin de faire plier les autorités, ainsi que leur réappropriation de la rhétorique politique et juridique des Niveleurs. Ces pétitions féminines invitent à nuancer l'idée que les femmes sont exclues des affaires politiques et incapables de mener une action collective. Bien que leur action sur la scène publique fût limitée—toutes leurs tentatives de faire pression sur le Parlement se soldèrent par un échec—leur prise de parole en leur nom propre invite à regarder autrement le statut de mineure que leur réservait par ailleurs la société patriarcale.*

**Keywords:** Women; Great Britain; Seventeenth century; History; Public opinion; Women in politics; Rhetoric.

In his groundbreaking study about the *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions and the Public Sphere* (2000), the American sociologist David Zaret stresses the fact that petitions "are an important source of evidence for studying the public sphere" (15); he insists on the necessity of re-historicizing the notions of the public sphere as theorized by Jürgen Habermas. The nature of petitioning, he explains, underwent major change during the English Revolution, "when political communication ceased to be governed by norms of secrecy and privilege" (6-7). Unlike traditional petitions that had to respect authority, mid-seventeenth-century petitions were often critical of political institutions. Besides, as they were often printed as pamphlets or reprinted in newsbooks (or both), they could become public documents and even instruments of propaganda (Zaret 220, Raymond 306). If we follow David Zaret's argument, the women's petitions of the English Revolution should not be excluded from the nascent public sphere that emerged in the 1640s; they contradict women's theoretical exclusion from politics that was still the norm (Smith 151); except for the very few women who could still vote as householders in the seventeenth century (Hirst 18-19), women had no political rights and were legally

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represented by their husbands, as this passage from *The Kingdomes Weekly Intelligencer* shows:

*You that are the women petitioners: Mr Speaker (by direction of the House) hath commanded me to tell you, That the matter you petition about is of an higher concernment then you understand, that the House gave an Answer to your Husbands; and therefore that you are desired to goe home, and look after your own businesse, and meddle with your huswifery. (Kingdomes Weekly Intelligencer, 24 April - 1 May 1649)*

Despite this kind of warning, Leveller women's petitioning continued. The phenomenon had started in the winter of 1641-1642 when some tradesmen's wives demonstrated in London streets and sent petitions to Parliament, protesting against economic losses and episcopacy (Gheeraert-Graffeuille 217, n2). Again in 1643, some women vociferously appealed to the houses so that peace could be restored (McArthur 698-709). Then, from 1649 to 1653, a group of Leveller women were disappointed by the course history had taken (Aylmer 41-49, Tuttle 245-258) and wrote at least five collective petitions;<sup>1</sup> they denounced the purge of the Long Parliament by Colonel Pride as well as the ensuing execution of Charles I in 1649. Instead of the democratic government they had imagined for England, the new commonwealth was a military regime that did not fulfil their expectations.

In order to demonstrate the paradoxical influence of women on mid-century politics, I wish to focus on the requests Leveller wives successively presented to the Rump, Cromwell and the Nominated Parliament between 1649 and 1653, as they indefatigably demanded the release of their imprisoned husbands,<sup>2</sup> while addressing issues that concerned the policies of the Commonwealth at large. Even though their grievances remained unanswered, they indisputably proved excellent rhetoricians determined to influence the authorities they petitioned. In order to analyse their rhetoric of power, I shall first look at their art of petitioning. Second, I shall concentrate on the rhetoric of compassion they employed so as to move the hard-hearted authorities that refused to listen to them. Third, I shall examine women's unparalleled re-appropriation of Leveller rhetoric and their foray into the world of men's politics.

Before Leveller women started petitioning Parliament, English women had long been sending petitions to the King and to local authorities. They usually put forward private grievances (Hobby 4-5), such as inheritance, property rights, or asked the return of a husband from captivity (Smith xii; Hobby 14-15). This type of (often) manuscript petitions were still current in the 1650s when some royalist women had to intercede on the behalf of their husbands whose estates had been sequestered or when war widows wanted to receive a pension, especially during the Commonwealth (Wiseman 49, Suzuki n19, 151, Hobby 14, Button 53). Leveller

<sup>1</sup> The titles of those petitions (and their abbreviated forms) are listed below at the end of the article.

<sup>2</sup> John Lilburne, William Walwyn, Thomas Prince, Richard Overton, Captain William Bray, Mr William Sawyer are named on the title-page of the first petition of 1649 (1649a).

women were indebted to this tradition, but they also became citizens in their own right when they tried to influence national policy making through petitioning (Skerpan 73-74, Wiseman 49).<sup>3</sup> They spoke collectively as a group and they were the successors of the female demonstrators and petitioners who had made themselves heard at the beginning of the Civil War (McEntee 95); like their predecessors they were aware of challenging gender norms, confessing "it [was] not [their] custome to addresse [themselves] to this House in the publike behalfe" (1649a) but they unquestionably vindicated new political rights through their egalitarian reading of the story of Creation: "since we are assured of our Creation in the image of God, and of an interest in Christ, equal unto men, as also of a proportionable share in the Freedoms of this Commonwealth, we cannot but wonder and grieve that we should appear so despicable in your eyes, as to be thought unworthy to Petition or represent our Grievances to this Honourable House" (1649b). In 1653 (b), they added that "[t]he ancient Laws of *England* [were] not contrary to the will of God" and therefore they "claim[ed] it as [their] right to have [their] Petitions heard" (1653b). This unprecedented vindication of equality is grounded on the petitioners' familiarity with the legal culture of petitioning. As experts of the law, they asserted "it [was theirs] and the Nations undoubted right to petition although an Act of Parliament were made against it" (1653b), being aware that petitioning was a medieval privilege and immunity (Zaret 87), originating in the Magna Carta (1215)<sup>4</sup> and reasserted in the Petition of Right of 1628 (Suzuki 146, Foster 21-45). Besides, when they pointed out "the known duty of Parliaments to receive Petitions" (1653b),<sup>5</sup> they referred to the duty of sovereigns to redress grievances, and, of course to answer petitions.

Although women petitioners believed they had a right to petition, their activism called into question expected gender roles and they had to apologise for voicing their opinions in public. To render their radical stance less outrageous, they had to adapt their discourses to the character of their addressees (Vickers 17, 19, Reboul 59-60). Their hearers being exclusively men who were suspicious of women's public speech, they had to construct an acceptable ethos, that is to say a suitable "character" to please them (Vickers 19-20, Reboul 59, Aristotle I, 2, 8-9). They opted for a twofold strategy. They first conformed to the tastes of their audience through their celebration of illustrious women from the Bible and British history that, so far, had been mostly praised by women of the aristocracy (McEntee 92). They seem to have learned the

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<sup>3</sup> The female authorship of those petitions was once questioned by the historian A. S. P. Woodhouse (367), but all recent studies take for granted that they were penned by women. Ian Gentles (294) and Katherine Gillespie (76, 85-88) have convincingly shown how the Independent polemicist Katherine Chidley had a hand in several of the petitions published between 1649 and 1653. The recurrent reference to the biblical story of Jael and Ahasuerus (to be found both in Chidley's writings and in female petitions) should be taken as further evidence of her authorship (Gillespie 76-90, Higgins 218). What is more, women's agency is suggested by their role in organising the subscription, and by the numerous critical accounts of their demonstrations published in the newsbooks (McEntee 97). Still, Anne Hughes insists on the fact that "their voice was not independent" (169).

<sup>4</sup> See Magna Carta, "*Nulli negabimus rectum aut justitiam*", chapter 40.

<sup>5</sup> In 1651, they regretted: "[we] are hitherto so far from gaining redress" and in 1653 (a) they complained "their ears were dead to Petitioners and Prisoners."

lesson taught by the Elizabethan rhetorician George Puttenham who had demonstrated that "no kinde of argument in all the Oratorie craft doth better peswade and more universally satisfie then example, which is but the representation of old memories and like successes happened in times past".<sup>6</sup> The detailed parallel between Esther and the women petitioners in the 1653 petition is worth a long theoretical development about the political role of women. The English women's intervention is *de facto* legitimized by the courage and heroism of their biblical forerunner.<sup>7</sup>

Your Honours may please to call to minde the unjust and unrighteous Acts made by King *Ahasuerus* in the case of *Mordecai* and the Jews; yet *Esther* that righteous woman being encouraged by the justness of the Cause (as we at this time are, through the justness of Mr. *Liburn's* Cause, and the common Cause of the whole Nation) did adventure her life to petition against so unrighteous Acts obtained by *Haman* the lews enemy. (1653b)

Moreover, the petitioners also modelled themselves on women worthies who had distinguished themselves in British history. In 1649 they celebrated "the British women" who had freed their land "from the tyranny of the Danes" (1649a, 3) while in 1653 they recorded the "never-to-be-forgotten deliverance obtained by the good women of *England* against the usurping Danes then in this Nation" (1653b). According to Mihoko Suzuki, the petitioners of 1653 may allude to the story of Boudica, who valiantly defended her people against the Roman invader—not the Danes—or, more probably, to Aethelflaed (c. 870-918), daughter of King Alfred, known as Lady of Mercians, "who conducted numerous campaigns against the Danes and the Norse, including leading her troops to victory at Derby" (Suzuki 149).

In order to comply with gender stereotypes, women also extolled conventional feminine virtues, such as humility, weakness, and subordination (Suzuki 147-148). Of course, those qualities were not specific to women—most male petitions are both deferential in tone and entitled "humble petitions" (1649 a, 1649b, 1651, 1653a)<sup>8</sup>—but they are still closely associated with the female identity as their authors spoke as "weaker vessels" (1649a, 3) and declared in the 1651 petition: "we have for many yeers (but in especial since 1647) chattered like Cranes, and mourned like Doves; yea with many sighs and tears have we presented our several complaints against God's and our enemies." Similarly, in 1653, they conjured up the image of the supplicant that also carries feminine connotations—although it could be once again applied to both sexes (Zaret 81-83, 90-91, Smith xiii): "We beg you therefore, *as upon our knees*,"<sup>9</sup> not to persist in our resolution of making good an Act so notoriously evil" (1653a). This

<sup>6</sup> George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, London, 1589, Bk 1, ch. XIX, 31. On the use of exemplarity see Wiseman 44-52.

<sup>7</sup> Esther is virtually a patron saint of Civil War women petitioners (Wiseman 46). On the galleries of heroic women during the English Revolution see Gheeraert-Graffeuille 220-221. Deborah, Esther and Bonduca are described by Thomas Heywood, *The Exemplary Lives and Memorable Acts of Nine of the Most Worthy Women in the World*, London, 1640, 2 (Deborah), 44 (Esther), Bonduca (68).

<sup>8</sup> The petitioners "pray", "beseech", "entreat" (1649a, 1649b, 1651, 1653a/b) in order to show their submission to higher powers.

<sup>9</sup> My emphasis.

posture of humility was neither gratuitous nor isolated: all mid-seventeenth-century petitioners carefully identified themselves with the pleading woman the better to assert their power and frequently took up the Christian paradox of strength in weakness in order to present themselves as formidable instruments of God:<sup>10</sup> "And therefore again, we entreat you to review our last petition in behalf of our Friends above mentioned, and not to slight the things therein contained, because they are presented unto you by the weak hand of Women, it being an usual thing with God, by weak means to work mighty effects" (1649b). Empowered by this special status conferred by God on "the weak things of the world," they ignored their previous apologies and boldly addressed the Rump with a relentless accumulation of rhetorical questions: "Have we not an equal interest with the men of this Nation ...? And can you imagine us to be so sottish or stupid, as not to perceive or not to be sensible when daily those strong defences of our Peace and Welfare are broken down ...? Would you have us keep at home in our houses ...?" (1649b) What is more, the rhetoric of the 1653 petition is strikingly close to the prophetic warnings of radical women of the English Revolution (Gheeraert-Graffeuille 221-222):

Be not high-minded but fear. For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not you: Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them that fell, severity: but towards you goodness, if you continue in his goodness, otherwise you also shall be cut off: For he is yesterday, today, and the same for ever. (1653a)

Unlike women prophets, however, the Leveller petitioners did not claim to be inspired by God and to be his messengers: they secularized the Christian paradox of strength in weakness and exploited its subversive rhetoric in order to capture the attention of their hearers.

In their various attempts to sway the Rump, the Barebone's Parliament or Cromwell, Leveller women did not content themselves with building an *ethos* that could inspire their audience with confidence; they also made use of another means of persuasion, namely *pathos*, "that depend[ed] on the putting the audience into a fit state of mind" (Aristotle I, 2, 8-9), that is to say arousing their affections, "those things wherewith Men being mov'd, make a different judgment of things" (II, 1, 86). In every petition, they wanted to arouse compassion, an affection which was analysed both in books of rhetoric and in early modern treatises on the passions.<sup>11</sup> They first appealed to this emotion because it was an efficient rhetorical tool to intervene in the public debate; as John Staines puts it "the shared passion of compassion—known also as mercy, pity and sympathy—was a model for public

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<sup>10</sup> See for instance 1 Corinthians 1:27: "God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty." See also Luke 1:46-52 and Psalms 8:12.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance Nicolas Coeffeteau, *Table of Human Passions*, tr. E. Grimston, London, 162; Edward Reynolds, *Treatise of the Passions and Faculties of the Soul of Man*, London, 1649; Jean-François Senault, *The Use of the Passions*, tr. Henry Earl of Monmouth, London, 1649; Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Mind*, 1601.

politics" (92). They also quite obviously drew upon compassion because it was regarded as a female virtue: "[compassion] inclines us to do Good to all, but more especially to those that are in Misery and stand in need of our help ... and this chiefly should Reign in the *lovely tender Breasts of the Female-Sex*, made for the Seats of mercy and Commiseration".<sup>12</sup>

Women Levellers indisputably exploited this psychological and rhetorical category, picturing themselves as models of compassion while instilling in the hearts of their hearers the sympathy they felt for their husbands and brothers (Hughes 167). Addressing the Rump in 1649, they evoked the misery of their husbands and asked: "must we show no sence of their sufferings, no tenderness of affections, no bowels of compassion, nor bear any testimony against so abominable cruelty and injustice?" (1649b). They relentlessly attributed the Leveller leaders' sufferings to the Rump's lack of compassion, deploring their "hard-heartedness", being "amazed at [their] defection, that [their] hearts should be so hardened as to justify what the Counsel of State have done in commitment of those men who have manifested a most hearty affection to the peace of the commonwealth and most compassionately tender and sensible of others sufferings" (1649a). They implied that if "their hearts [had] melt[ed] in tenderness" (1653a) they would have been able to sympathise with the Levellers. Like most Christian critics of stoicism (from Augustine to Calvin), they regarded the lack of compassion as sinful and monstrous (Staines 98-101)<sup>13</sup>—on the other hand they seem to follow the Jesuit Thomas Wright who insisted on the good use of compassion: "[p]assions, are not only, not wholly to be extinguished (as the Stoicks seemed to affirme) but sometimes to be moued, and stirred vp for the service of virtue...: for mercie and compassion will mooue vs often to pity" (31). Hence, in order to arouse compassion and pity in their audience, Leveller women dwelt on their own experiences of suffering, following Aristotle who encouraged orators to insist on "all considerable Calamities occasion'd by Fortune", "Death; Stripes; Afflictions of Body, old Age; Diseases, Hunger" (II, 8, 112). They used all sorts of verbal strategies, translating their "sighs and tears" (1651) into hyperboles and amplifications; they were "afflicted" (1653a/b), "over-prest" (1649a) "overwhelmed in affliction" (1649a) and "the greatest and most helpless sufferers therein" (1649a); they lamented the "poverty, misery and famine, [which] like a mighty torrent, [was] breaking upon [them]" (1649a), using a ternary rhythm to produce sympathy among their audience; they even went as far as to sacrifice themselves for their starving children, declaring: "we are not able to see our children hang upon us, and cry out for bread, and have not wherewithall to feed them, we had rather die than see that day" (1649a). In their next petition of 1649 (b), they identified with their husbands, "[whose] houses [are] worse then Prisons

<sup>12</sup> *The Ladies Dictionary, being a general entertainment of the fair-sex a work never attempted before in English*, London, 1694, 135-136. See Richard Allestree, *The Ladies Calling*, London, 1673, "Of Compassion", 48-65. On the gendered dimension of emotions, see Jennifer C. Vaught, *Masculinity and Emotion in Early Modern English Literature*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia, with Introduction, Translation and Notes*, ed. Ford Lewis Battles and André Malan Hugo, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969, 51\*-53\*. See Augustine, *Of the citie of God vvith the learned comments of Io. Lod. Viues. Englished by I.H.*, London, 1610, Bk IX, ch. 4 and 5, 340-344.



to [them], and [their] Lives worse than death" (1649b). In some places, this sense of injustice gives way to anger, another emotion described by Aristotle as "the desire of apparent revenge" (II, 2, 86), which could be useful when one wanted to defend God's laws, the Commonwealth and punish the offending party (Kennedy 12). In 1653, they called for revenge, warning Cromwell that if the policy of the Rump did not change, they would all have to pay for it:

Al which we crave leave to alude unto your case, that, if it be possible, we may prevaile with you to propose unto your selves to be unlike unto them in all things ...; but ... we beseech you to watch over your selves against the spilling of Blood, especially the *blood* of the Innocent, which cryeth aloud for vengeance in the eares of God. (1653a)

To awaken indignation against the Rump and compassion for their friends, the women Leveller portrayed their enemies as blood-thirsty monsters deprived of humanity and incapable of compassion—a sin according to most Christians in Early modern Europe. They most forcefully opposed the monstrous attitude of the Rump, to the extraordinary sympathy that drew together all the Levellers whatever their sex and their social position:

Nor will we ever rest until we have prevailed, that We, our Husbands, Children, Friends, and Servants, may not be liable to be thus abused, violated and butchered at mens Wills and Pleasures. But if nothing will satisfie you but the blood of those just men, those constant undaunted Asserters of the Peoples Freedoms will satisfie your thirst, drink also, and be gluttred with our blood, and let us fall all together: Take the blood of one more, and take all: Slay one, slay all. (1649b)

Nevertheless, as if they wanted to show that they were not just creatures actuated by their emotions and capable of using pathos, women Levellers also deployed more rational arguments in order to serve the cause of their husbands and to voice their own views on government.

Indeed, women petitioners were not mere supplicants kneeling and weeping in order to impose their vision; as experts in rhetoric, conscious of their techniques, they knew when it was appropriate to manipulate emotions or to argue through reason (Vickers 20). First, like their husbands they defended their civil liberties, "those liberties and securities, contained in the Petition of Right<sup>14</sup> and the other good Laws of the Land" (1649b), and upheld the "cause of the People in their native freedom and right" (1649a). They regarded themselves as citizens enjoying the same fundamental rights as men and their statement of legal equality between the sexes echoes John Lilburne's own description of popular sovereignty in *The Free-man's Freedom Vindicated*: "all and every particular and individual man and woman ... are

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<sup>14</sup> It was initiated by Edward Coke and addressed to Charles I in 1628; it sought to redress abuses of civil liberties, and focuses on such issues as arbitrary arrest, the imposition of martial law, and the abrogation of Habeas Corpus.

and were by nature all equal and alike in power, dignity, authority, and majesty—none of them having (by nature) any authority, dominion or magisterial power, one over or above another".<sup>15</sup> Being legally equal to men, they played the roles of authoritative judges and exposed the illegal policies of the Rump that arrested and sentenced their husbands and friends to death. In particular, they denounced their breach of natural rights and their use of illegality. Revising and re-staging the very trial of their friends, they did not hesitate to point out the "extrajudicial" practise of their enemies that "exceed[ed] the bounds of law and reason" (1649a):

Nor shall we be satisfied, however you deal with our Friends, except you free them from under their present *extrajudicial*<sup>16</sup> imprisonment and force upon them, and give them full reparations for their forceable Attachment, &c. And leave them first to last to be proceeded against by due process of Law, and give them respect from you, answerable to their good and faithful Service to the Common-wealth. (1649b)

The members of the Rump are not only accused of illegal practices and of exercising "arbitrary power", but also of perverting the law, confusing universal rights with their personal desires, acting as tyrants—"trampling all the known ancient Liberties of the Nation under their feet, and turning their Wills into Lawes, as the Act for banishing Mr Lilburn, in a higher manner then all the tyrants that ever were before them" (1653a). It is ironical here that the petitioners should so bluntly recycle the secular and providential arguments that the members of the Rump Parliament had used against their royalist enemies in the 1640s:

Yet notwithstanding, we know not yet what oppression is removed, we know many that are brought upon us, yea those very particulars of tyranny that were complained of in former Rulers, and were the just cause of Gods displeasure against them, and so of their destruction; are yet practised by your selves in the case of Lieutenant Colonel *Iohon Lilburne*, Master *William Walwyn*, Master *Thomas Prince*, and Master *Richard Overton*, as if God Almighty had relinquished you and did permit you to doe those things that not onely contradict your selves, but pronounce your own condemnation out of your own mouthes. (1649a)

The accusation reaches a climax when the MPs, whom the women petitioners call "incroachers and oppressors", are charged with murder as well as with conducting a policy that is "destructive to Civil society" (1649a). This charge is based on the allegation that there was "an intent by sudden surprise in the said night to fetch [the Leveller prisoners] from the Tower of *White-Hall* there to murder them, if by the pretence of law they could not destroy them" (1649a). The phrase "the pretence of law" cynically reflects the very strong sense of betrayal that pervades the Leveller petitions. Such bitterness was exacerbated by the Rump's ignorance of the recent involvement of the Levellers in the civil wars: "That our Husbands, ourselves and friends, have done their parts for you, and thought nothing

<sup>15</sup> John Lilburne, *The Free-man's Freedom Vindicated* (London, 1646) in Woodhouse 17.

<sup>16</sup> My emphasis.

too deare and pretious in your behalf, our money, plate, jewels, rings, bodkins, etc. have bin offered at your feet" (1649a). In this context it is no wonder that women petitioners, like their male counterparts, should relate the tyranny of the Rump to the "Norman yoke of bondage and oppression" (1651), reminding Cromwell that the "Norman laws of the Oppressors still [bore] Dominion over [them]" (1651; Lurbe 11, Dow 37-38, Wootton 426-428).<sup>17</sup> "The Debtor's Law" (Higgins 207), which implies " [t]he imprisonment of men and women for debt" (1651), is emblematic of the Norman bondage they all abhorred, "the poor ... [being] utterly disabled and disheartened from suing for their Debt, their Rights, and Inheritance, violently held from them by the rich and mighty" (1651). What is striking in this petition to Cromwell is that women take for granted the right to demand legislative reforms from Parliament (McEntee 105). Their interest in law practices remains paradoxical as they speak of matters from which they are theoretically excluded since women had no rights under the common law.

As the reference to the "Norman yoke" has already shown, the scope of those female petitions is not limited to airing Leveller grievances against tyrannical powers: in 1649 the execution of the Leveller soldier Robert Lockyer after his participation in the mutiny of 27 April 1649 (McEntee 102-103) leads them to broach more general issues, such as the use of "Martial Law in time of Peace" (1649b). Their reflections reveal how well they understood the natural rights theory that was the very basis of Leveller thinking:

Nay, shall such valiant religious men as Mr *Robert Lockyer* be lyable to Law Martial, and be judged by his Adversaries, and most unhumanly shot to death? *Shall the blood of the War* be shed in time of Peace? Doth not the word of God expresly condemne it? Doth not the Petition of Right declare, that no person ought to be judged by Law Martial (except in time of Warre) and that all Commissions given to execute Martial Law in time of Peace, are contrary to the Lawes and Statutes of the Land? Doth not Sir *Ed. Cook* in his chapter of Murder in the third part of his Institutes, hold it for good law (and since owned and published by this Parliament) that for a General or Officers of an Army in time of Peace, to put any man (although a Souldier) to death by colour of Marshal Law, it is absolute murther in that General? (1649b)

Perfectly controlling deliberative oratory and well-versed in Leveller literature they here state the necessity to dissolve the Rump and organise the elections of a new Parliament based on an extension of franchise (a claim that was contained in the *Agreement of the People*)—but here as elsewhere, during this period at least, women refrain from claiming their right to vote:

It will never go well with this Nation ... until their Motions, counsels and propositions are better regarded; ... as, that Petition was burnt by the Hangman, that of the 11. of September and the *Agreement of the People*; the last whereof, as the finall result of the

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<sup>17</sup> See also R. B. Seaberg, "The Norman Conquest and the Common Law: The Levellers and the Argument from Continuity", *The Historical Journal*, 24 (4), 1981, 791-806.

rest, we intreat may finde large encouragement from this Honourable House: that so we may speedily have a new and equall Representative. (1649a)

The women here did not only *repeat* what their husbands said: when the latter were silenced, they wanted to take over from them, describing themselves as the "subscribed *Representators*"<sup>18</sup> of the "poor, enslaved, oppressed and distressed men and women in this land" (1651). This claim to *represent* the people undercuts the idea that women could only be *represented* by their husbands, being deprived of a political and legal identity of their own. In a similar fashion, their absence on the forum is questioned by the newsbook accounts of their demonstrations and their high level of democratic organisation; they had their petitions signed, through wards, parishes, taverns and inns (McEntee 96-97, Gillespie 91):

*All those Women that are Approvers hereof, are desired to subscribe it, and to deliver in their Subscriptions to the women which will be appointed in every Ward and Division to receive the same; and to meet at Westminster Hall upon Munday the 23 of this instant April 1649, betwixt 8 and 9 of clock in the forenoon. (1649a)*

Leveller women's petitions offer an alternative view of women's place in the nascent "public sphere of publication and debate" (Gillespie 91) of the English Revolution; they show that the conflicts and the divisions of that period gave women a unique opportunity to assert an otherwise elusive political identity and to exercise "their appropriated political freedoms" (McEntee 97); they also oblige us to revise the well-worn idea that the female sex was excluded from politics and was incapable of collective action. Although the political influence of Leveller women petitioners remained constitutionally and historically limited—we know all their attempts to lobby parliament ended in failure—, their forceful use of rhetoric counterbalances the silence to which they were theoretically confined. Further, the fact that they spoke in their own names as citizens is unheard-of: in mid-seventeenth-century England, the only other women who voiced political views were prophetesses—but those women, unlike the Leveller petitioners, always made it clear that their speeches were not their own but the Lord's.

#### **Leveller Women's petitions (1649-1653)**

[1649a] *To the Supream authority of this Nation, the Commons assembled in Parliament: The humble petition Of divers wel-affected Women Inhabiting the Cities of London, Westminster, the Borough of Southwark, Hamblets, and Places adjacent. [24 April 1649], E 551 (14).*

[1649b] *To the Supreme Avthority of England The Commons Assembled in Parliament. The Humble Petition of divers well-affected women of the Cities of London and Westminster, the Borough of Southwark, Hamblets,*

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<sup>18</sup> My emphasis.

*and Parts Adjacent. Affecters and Approvers of the Petition of Sept. 11 1648.* [5 May 1649], 669 f. 14 (27).

[1651] *The Womens Petition, To the Right Honorable, his Excellency, the most Noble and Victorious Lord General Cromwell.* [27 October 1651], 669 f 16 (30).

[1653a] *To the Parliament of the Common-Wealth of England. The humble petition of diuers afflicted women, in behalf of M:lohn Lilburn prisoner in Newgate.* [25 June 1653], 669 f. 17. 26.

[1653a] *Unto Every Individual Member of Parliament: The Humble Representation of divers afflicted Women-Petitioners to the Parliament, on the behalf of Mr. John Lilburn.* [29 July 1653], 669 f. 17 (36).

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