
Of Devotion and Dissent: An Collins's *Divine Songs and Meditacions* (1653)

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For this inaugural, digital issue of *Discoveries in Renaissance Culture*, I thought it might be fitting to offer an essay about one of the small discoveries in Renaissance literary studies I was lucky enough to stumble across during my graduate training at the University of Washington: the poetry of An Collins, a mid-seventeenth-century English devotional and political writer. This essay has a four-fold purpose: first of all, to deliver a brief and true relation about my so-called discovery of An Collins; second, to introduce a digital readership to her writing that still remains largely unknown; third, to trace the reception history of Collins's work from 1815 to 2005; and fourth, to articulate a political analysis of her poetry that reflects upon the contingent synergy between research methods, pedagogy, scholarly interpretation, and critical debate.

As we all know, "discoveries" in the field tend to emerge (if serendipitously) from documented conditions of possibility that may have been forgotten, overlooked, or reconfigured by recent scholars. Such was the case in 1996 when I first encountered An Collins. In Professor van den Berg's course, "Sects and Texts," we were reading from *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen* (Graham et al.), which includes, after an introductory note on Collins by the editors, a very brief selection of poems from *Divine Songs and Meditacions* (1653)—the only known volume authored by this figure. The following statement from that editorial note roused my curiosity:

It has, significantly, proved difficult to find out anything about An Collins's life other than that revealed in her autobiographical poetry. (Graham 55).

Who was An Collins? What else did she write and publish? Was she known among contemporaries? What was her cultural milieu? Which scholars have written about her work?

I began my research. At the start, I knew that only one copy of *Divine Songs and Meditaciones* existed and that the volume was (and still is) held in the collection at The Huntington Library. I also knew, from the editors of *Her Own Life*, that Stanley Stewart had edited and published, in 1961, a photographic facsimile selected edition of *Divine Songs and Meditaciones*; and that the entire volume of poetry could also be found in the Early English Books microfilm collection. Much to my surprise, the Suzzallo & Allen Libraries did not appear to own a copy of the photographic facsimile selected edition. What was even stranger was that the library's electronic catalogue did not contain a citation for *Divine Songs and Meditaciones* in the EEB microfilms. Careful scholar that she was (and still is), Sara van den Berg asked right away: "Well, did you check the old print copy of the card catalogue?" (By the time I arrived in Seattle in 1993, the UW Libraries had already completed the digitization process). And so I ventured into the library's basement. Sure enough, there were two typed cards in the author file drawer: one for Stewart's facsimile selected edition (which I quickly retrieved from the library's top floor); and one for the EEB microfilm reel (which I consulted the following week when I had more time).

What I had discovered there, in the dim corridors of the basement of the Suzzallo & Allen Libraries, has remained with me to this day: the business of scholarship involves a capricious, dynamic, erratic, and rigorous process of knowledge transmission that hinges upon human—that is, imperfect—potential. Or, to put the matter more succinctly: literary knowledge is radically indeterminate.

An Collins has certainly suffered the consequences of that mercurial process more than most seventeenth century English literary figures—even the obscure writers—because her first name, "An," functions as a stopword in many information retrieval systems. That simple factor effectively erases her identity from the full potential of electronic research. The poet's name appears twice in *Divine Songs and Meditaciones*: on the title page and at the end of the volume's first preface, titled "To the Reader." During my ongoing investigations, which would eventually contribute to my dissertation's chapter on An Collins, I worked with several online databases and CD ROMs, including Historical Abstracts, Biography Genealogy Master Index, Periodicals Contents Index,

World Biographical Index, Art and Humanities Citation Index, Contemporary Women's Issues, Dissertation Abstracts International, and the MLA International Bibliography. Of these eight resources, only Biography Genealogy Master Index permitted me to search for "Collins, An." The other indexes would not accept "An" for the same reason that Contemporary Women's Issues ironically stated, in reply to my repeated keyword commands, "INVALID SEARCH STATEMENT—SEARCH TERM CANNOT BEGIN OR END WITH A STOPWORD."

The singularity of this poet and the single copy of her one volume remain undiscovered for most scholars in the field. This may be due to the fact that we still know nothing else about the person, An Collins, apart from what cryptic autobiographical evidence may be gleaned from close readings of her poems. Many of Collins's critics have even remarked on the difficulty of identifying with certainty this figure's name and gender. The title page of *Divine Songs and Meditations* represents the poet as "An Collins," which has perplexed readers since 1815 when A. F. Griffith published the first commentary on her work. Because "An" is an uncommon spelling for the mid-seventeenth century, many have supposed it to signify "Ann" or "Anne," while others have proposed "Anthony" and even the generic "an," arguing that the author's identity could have been unknown even to the printer. Is "An" an abbreviation for either Ann or Anne? This seems plausible enough, and most editors and critics since Rev. Alexander Dyce (1825) have taken the liberty of interchangeably reading either Ann or Anne for "An." Could "An" refer to Anthony? Sidney Gottlieb ("Introduction" vii) shrewdly notes that few critics have followed this hypothesis that was first proposed in 1816 by Sir Egerton Brydges. The premise seems untenable for at least two reasons. First of all, there is ample internal evidence in the poems themselves that their author was a woman. (See, for example, "The Discourse," lines 52-4; and "Another Song: The Winter of my infancy being over-past," lines 26-30). Secondly, there are no records of an Anthony Collins who could have been either An's contemporary or relative. Since Germaine Greer's work on Collins (1988), critics have standardized their interpretation, allowing the poet's first name to stand as it appears on the book's title-page: An.

Other relevant questions remain, however. Could “An” designate a feminine poet-persona invented by a male author? Is “An” a pseudonym? Does “An” mean “anonymous”? Could “An” function merely as an article referring to a poet with an unknown first name? Is “An” the invention of a hawker or printer or bookseller who produced and circulated *Divine Songs and Meditacions* without extending publication rights to the author? Does “An” indicate a suppositious publication? Were all of the poems in *Divine Songs and Meditacions* authored by one figure, or could some (perhaps all) of them be copies of originals (now lost), transcribed, preserved, and transmitted by a genealogy of women co-poets? All of these hypothetical questions are valid—not only because so little is known about An Collins, but also because (as many recent studies have shown) publication during the Commonwealth and Interregnum periods was such a complex and unpredictable business, especially for women (Ostovich and Sauer; North; Pearson; Greer et al.; and Prior). Despite the most recent efforts to discover more information about An Collins—(Wilcox, “The Presence”; Evans; Howard, “An Collins”; Gottlieb, “Life of Writing”; Price; Demers; Hurley; Norcliffe; and Skwire)—nothing more is known apart from what little autobiographical information her poems intimate.

Since 1996 some things have changed (while others have not) in the world of electronic research. For example, we now have Early English Books Online in which the author, An Collins, may be found (stopword and all) and through which her one book, *Divine Songs and Meditacions*, may be retrieved, read, and reproduced. However, at the time of this essay’s composition, “An Collins” is still not a searchable phrase in the MLA International Bibliography via any of the following fields: Default, Author, Subjects—All, and Primary Subject Author. Nor may our poet be found in the MLA under either of her aliases, “Ann” or “Anne.” “Divine Songs and Meditacions” is MLA-friendly, but will only yield the current gathering of scholarly contributions if and when the persistent user follows these exact steps: after submitting the title phrase (in either the Default or Title fields) follow the link for any of the individual records to a full citation page; then, within that page, follow the link to the listing for “Primary Subject Author: Collins, An (fl. 1653).” This is currently the only path by which one may arrive at the most accurate listing in MLA of all ten records for

scholarship on An Collins and her poetry. (I hope to help correct this glitch in the coming months).

I think that all of these reflections prove at least two points about literary research in the digital age: that a number of variable search strategies (contingent upon the parameters of each information resource) will increase the likelihood of positive results; and that both print and electronic information resources must be consulted and critically evaluated against each other. A final reflection here seems crucial and also contestable, depending upon one's "feelings" about information literacy: that the current so-called renaissance in digital media is actually transforming not only our research and teaching, but the very nature (form and substance) of literary knowledge.

The book in question, *Divine Songs and Meditacions*, is an octavo composed of 52 leaves that was rebound in the early nineteenth century with English polished calf. The volume was published in 1653 by Richard Bishop, brother-in-law of Miles Flesher, who acquired William Stansby's business in 1635 and was a printer in London at St. Peter, Paul's Wharf from 1636-54. Of the more than one hundred books he produced during those years, this is Bishop's only volume of poetry and his only work written by a woman. The nature of Collins's affiliation with Bishop is not known. Bishop's engraved device, or imprint, appears on the title page just below the author's name. In the upper right-hand corner of the title page appears the signature of Thomas Park in whose library *Divine Songs and Meditacions* remained until 1815 when the book was sold to Thomas Hill. After Hill, there was a series of owners: James Midgeley, Longman, Mark Masterman Sykes, Thomas Thorpe, and Richard Heber. A. S. W. Rosenbach purchased the volume for Henry E. Huntington at the Britwell Sale, March 31-April 4, 1924. The only extant copy of *Divine Songs and Meditacions* is currently preserved at the Huntington Library, shelfmark RB 54047 (Wing C5355). William Thomas Lowndes (1862), W. Carew Hazlitt (1867), and S. Austin Allibone (1899) each record a 1658 octavo edition; however, that publication either has been lost or never existed. To date, there are three modern editions: Stewart's photographic facsimile selected edition (1961); Gottlieb's annotated, modernized, complete text (1996); and a more recent photographic facsimile edition (2003) introduced by Robert C. Evans.

Divine Songs and Meditations is a collection of devotional poems with two prefaces, one written in prose, the other in verse, each revealing little about An Collins, whom Gottlieb (1997) describes as “a poet nearly anonymous” (“Experience of Defeat” 217). Despite the lack of autobiographical information in Collins’s volume, some critics, such as Elaine Hobby (1988) and Helen Wilcox (“An Collins” 1989), place *Divine Songs and Meditations* within the early modern tradition of spiritual autobiography. Since Griffith’s commentary, Collins has been represented primarily as a quietist devotional writer who held little or no concern for either religious or political conflicts, a view that emphasizes the poet’s withdrawal from the world.

The book’s first preface, “To the Reader,” supports such apolitical interpretations, immediately articulating the consequences of physical suffering: “I inform you, that by divine Providence, I have been restrained from bodily employments, suting with my dispoicion, which enforced me to a retired Course of life” (lines 1-3). Throughout her volume, Collins intimates that she endured chronic afflictions, although she does not specify either the cause or course of her illness. In the book’s second preface, “The Preface,” she indicates that “through weakness” she was “to the house confin’d” (line 1). Collins often describes her sufferings as “Crosses”, as in the following lines from her longest poem, “The Discourse”: “Even in my Cradle did my Crosses breed, / And so grew up with me, unto this day, / Whereof variety of Cares proceed, / Which of my selfe, I never could alay” (lines 57-60). An Collins may have been chronically ill, perhaps homebound, even bedridden. Her withdrawal from the world and avowed celibacy may have been dictated by her physical condition; or perhaps her seclusion was her own choice.

Because Collins did experience chronic physical pain, her employment of the spiritual affliction topos bears “a fruit most rare, / That is not common with every woman / That fruitfull are,” as she writes in “Another Song (The Winter of my infancy being over-past)” (lines 28-30). Perhaps more than most devotional poets of the seventeenth century, Collins understood the essential difficulty of meditating upon timeless spiritual truths from a fallen perspective within the temporal world. Collins’s apparent retreat from public life was indeed a defining experience, but did not preclude her social criticism through verse. Despite the quietism

that her devotional poetry suggests, An Collins engages in subtle critiques of her own art and moment in time through her work's crafted disengagement from politics and history (Howard, "Politics of Mourning").

The second preface (and first poem) in *Divine Songs and Meditations*, "The Preface" (19 stanzas; 133 lines), establishes relationships between spiritual affliction, personal spiritual knowledge, and social criticism that are central to Collins's devotional and political poetics. This experiential and rhetorical progression—from suffering to reflection to praxis—turns upon a principle of conversion: through saving faith, Collins extends to her readers a defense of knowledge that yields (in a majority of her poems) religious, political, and historical critiques. The first three stanzas of "The Preface" thus celebrate the life of the mind as a gift from God, while the fourth stanza defines both a limit to God's influence in the secular realm and the poet's concomitant cultural work toward the reformation of society.

"The Preface" expresses both devotion and dissent, praise and protest grounded in the poet's conversion of spiritual affliction into redemptive knowledge. Collins admonishes "Prophets Evangelicall" (line 34) who enshroud the Gospel's light in allegorical teaching; she excoriates heretical sects, or "frothy braines" (line 59), who crave prophecies of Christ's return. Evangelists "(Directed by a greater Light) [who] declare / The ground of Truth more in a Gospel-way" (lines 86-7) also receive her criticism: "I therefore think theyr tastes of Truth is ill, / Who Truths profession, quickly alter will" (lines 69-70). In one memorable stanza, Collins invokes the enclosed garden topos in order to attack what she calls "a spider generacion" (line 114) of readers who would extract from her "flowers, of so rare a kinde," (l. 109) "vennom so compacted, / As that their touch occasions depravacion / Though lighting in the fragrantest plantacion" (lines 115-17). Compared to the "spider generacion," An Collins figures herself as a "Bee" (line 121) who converts spiritual strife into social strength. Her devotional poetry, as "The Preface" suggests, would cull the essence of God's intentions, transporting "strong perfumes" (line 94) to "some good end" (line 122). Here, as in her political elegy, "A Song composed in time of the Civill Warr," Collins aligns herself with Deborah (whose namesake is *Bee*), a prophetess and ruler in Judges 4: 4 and 5.

In “A Song composed in time of the Civill Warr, when the wicked did much insult over the godly” (13 stanzas; 104 lines), Collins appraises her historical moment through an affirmation of spiritual truths grounded in virtuous action. In 1961 Stewart judged this poem not “representative of [Collins’s] work as a whole” (iii), omitting the elegy from his photographic facsimile selected edition of *Divine Songs and Meditacions* despite his recognition of the work’s political engagement: “Her poem on the Civil War suggests that she was not in sympathy with the left wing of the Puritan movement” (iv, n. 6). Only recently have scholars granted this important elegy sustained analyses within the context of Collins’s whole book and cultural milieu (Gottlieb, “Life of Writing” and “Experience of Defeat”; Howard, “Politics of Mourning”; and Price). Of all the poems in *Divine Songs and Meditacions* this elegy most explicitly formulates a social critique. Collins begins boldly, first differentiating herself from heretical prophets and canonical poets, then aligning herself with the Biblical prophetess Deborah, whose song praises triumphant godly acts in times of religious and political turmoil: “With *Deborah* twere joy to sing / When that the Land hath Rest, / And when that Truth shall freshly spring, / Which seemeth now deceast” (lines 9-12).

Divine Songs and Meditacions was published in 1653, shortly after the so-called Engagement Controversy that shapes Collins’s polemic in “A Song composed in time of the Civill Warr,” as Gottlieb first observed (“Experience of Defeat” 224). Throughout 1649 and 1650 propagandists for the parliamentary government encouraged the swearing of oaths of allegiance to the new state. The Engagement Oath of January, 1650 represents the culmination of that movement. Such pledges of allegiance were resisted not only by Royalists, but also by a diversity of religious and political groups, including Levellers, Quakers, Independents, Millenarians, and Baptists. As Collins remarks, opponents of the Engagement Oath faced “The Losse of lightsom Liberty” (l. 45) through imprisonment and torture.

From the time of Griffith’s first notes on her verses (1815) until the publication of Stewart’s photographic facsimile selected edition of *Divine Songs and Meditacions* (1961), the prevailing critical view held that this writer was simply a devotional poet of the private sphere whose poems, while clearly inferior, may be usefully compared to those of George Herbert. Since Stewart’s

edition (which omitted “A Song composed in time of the Civill Warr,” thereby inadvertently underscoring for future readers the poet’s public agency), and since Gottlieb’s first complete, modern edition (1996), the emergence of the political An Collins is surely a sign of the times. Following her relative obscurity throughout the nineteenth century, then her intermittent visibility throughout much of the twentieth, An Collins—the mid-seventeenth century English woman poet of both devotion and dissent—has once again reached a horizon of critical expectation that continues to shift and be shaped by the field(s) of research and writing. New biographical evidence will surely be discovered one day, provided that scholars remain committed to working within and against the full range (manuscript, print, and electronic) of research materials.

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