

○ PROPHETIC PERFORMANCE ART

Yvonne Sherwood

Yvonne Sherwood is Senior Lecturer in Old Testament/Tanakh and Judaism in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Glasgow. She has published, among other things, The Prostitute and the Prophet, A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture, and Derrida's Bible.

Correspondence to Yvonne Sherwood: Y.Sherwood@arts.gla.ac.uk

The Prophets, said Luther, 'have a queer way of talking'. I suspect he meant 'queer' in the old-fashioned sense. I don't *think* he was talking about texts like Micah 4.6-13 and Isaiah 42.14-16 and recent work by Erin Runions and Ken Stone. But the fact remains that the Prophets have a queer way of talking and – more to the point for this collection – a queer way of performing. This collection brings together some experimental academic work on what we are calling (I think for the first time) 'Prophetic Performance Art'.

One of the things that fascinated me when I wrote *The Prostitute and the Prophet* in 1996 was the idea of Hosea 1-3 as a 'curious, ritualized dumb-show' to quote Gabriel Jospivoci. The scenes in which prophets made meaning from various domestic items and members of their own family, as walking signifiers, reminded me of that lovely improvisation scene in Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, where the clown, Launce, takes two shoes and makes of them his symbolic 'mother' and symbolic 'father'. I was, and continue to be, intrigued by the idea of the difficulty of cajoling complex meaning from a limited (and bathetic) range of props, including, at the centre, the prophet's own body, and the extension of that body in 'his' family, as in Hosea. Still striving for ways to think about these and similar performances, I later published another experimental piece on 'Prophetic Scatology' (not a misprint), in which I looked at some of the more striking prophetic texts/events as if they were installations in the 'Sensation' exhibition, then in London. I then sat back as spectator for the public furore as the exhibition moved from London to New York where Rudolph Giuliani protested the blasphemy of High Culture and High Religion that he saw exemplified in Chris Ofili's 'The Holy Virgin Mary'. I doubt he would have appreciated my argument that there's something rather biblical and prophetic about that black virgin Mary composed partly from cut-outs of female genitalia and partly from elephant dung – dung and female genitalia being rather favoured prophetic tropes. (Actually I had not talked about Ofili's 'The Holy Virgin Mary', but had discussed other pieces by such artists as Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, the Chapman brothers, Marc Quinn and Ofili which I had then placed alongside installations such as Ezekiel 4 as *Siege I: wheat, barley, spelt, millet, cow dung, barber's razor, rope, human hair, human flesh, cooking utensils, scales, measuring jug*). The point of the 'Prophetic Scatology' piece was not that these passages were rude slips and nice excuses to joke about a bawdy Bible (as people have been doing, on and off, ever since the medieval period). Rather, this 'sensational' aspect went to the heart – or a rather more visceral centre – of prophetic language and performance. Prophetic performers and speakers seem particularly, indeed peculiarly, dedicated to provocation and the ideal of turning the prophet and the audience inside out.

The difference between the way in which the words of prophecy gabble about themselves and the self-description of other biblical genres – Wisdom for example (by which I mean books like Job, Qoheleth, Proverbs) – is revealing. Wisdom uses phrases such as 'apples of gold in settings

of silver' (Prov. 25.11) to describe what it wants to do with words. Its self-conscious descriptions of itself suggests words as possessions, commodities, and words aligned in neat, even exquisite, arrangements of *mots justes*, like the setting of a ring. Wisdom writing is portrayed as something that enhances your credentials as a writer and wordsmith, a skill that one would invoke to add to the sense of one's self in the ancient equivalent of a C.V. Above all, wisdom writing strives to avoid ugly words and contorted expressions: words that sting like vinegar or hobble like a 'lame man's legs' (to use Wisdom's own formulations that are admittedly – and I'll use the phrase for once even though I think it's deeply suspect – not very 'P.C.'). Prophecy, in contrast, seems to actively seek out strained conceits and ugly expressions and violent and abrasive words that (in just one sample of its own meta-words about itself) slash through the social fabric and slice the people in two. A scene in which flattering crowds gather round and praise the poet for having a tongue like a musical instrument would, one imagines, make a Wisdom writer flush with pride. But it is anathema to Ezekiel (33.30-32). Ezekiel classes it as failure to be perceived as a 'maker of metaphors' or an exponent of (mere) craft. Prophecy actively seeks out the kind of language that will make the audience cry out for straight/smooth things and 'pretty songs' in *contrast* (Isaiah 30.11; Jer. 6.14; Ezek. 13.8-13). It aims to strike/assault rather than to impress or seduce.

Instead of adding to the self – as attributes, or possession, or skill – prophetic words seem so often to consume the self. And it's at this point that we cross the border between word and performance. For the (all-)consuming nature of the prophetic word is dramatised in the body of the prophet, who is both its subject (speaker) and its object (victim). This paradox makes prophetic literature and performance generically other to more traditional (composed) literary and performative arts. The prophet is frequently overwhelmed by 'his' text, which dramatises its control of him rather than his control of it. It fills his body – sometimes literally, in metaphors of him eating it. It then causes him to break out in 'crazy actions', as Maimonides complained. Maimonides deemed such acts physically and actually impossible (dreams merely) because they so intensely violated the prophet's dignity, self and poise. By, for example, baking bread over dung, going naked and barefoot, marrying a prostitute, putting a yoke on his shoulders, or offering up parts of his own body as both material and stage for prophetic tropes (Jer. 13; Hos. 1–3; Ezek. 4–5), the prophet performs the heaviness of the oracle/word as 'burden' (*masa*) and excess. By submitting to social/bodily abjection that would be anathema to the Wisdom writer, he shows how he is governed by a word and imperative not his own, indeed counter to his own. Crazy actions and crazy language are prophetic *special effects* designed to create the very *special effect* of the super-natural para-normal, *das Heilege*, which so frequently finds its expression – as Other – through the *unnatural*, *abnormal*. Unlike Wisdom, Prophecy claims to be the direct word of God, and prophetic language and prophetic bodies reel in the attempt to create a sense of words that, by definition, are not our words, and of actions that, by definition, are not 'our' own.

Insofar as they have spoken at all about prophetic performance art, biblical commentators have tended to opt for domesticating metaphors that imply rather straight performances. They regularly use phrases such as 'street theatre', which to my mind suggests something as innocuous as juggling in Covent Garden to please the tourists. They imply that these 'dramas' could run on Broadway or be performed by the Church Drama group, or even be used to undermine the 'unexamined conventions of dominant society' without indulging in anything as maverick or marginal as 'wacko nuttiness or exhibitionism' as Walter Bruggemann puts it (Bruggemann, cit.

Stewart, 'Crown of Thorns'). They have tended to assume the most basic dramatic model in which the author-director transmits a message through a straightforward act staged, as it were, under a proscenium arch. These assumptions are thoroughly contested in the two opening acts of this collection: Teresa Hornsby's 'Ezekiel Off Broadway' and Mark Brummitt's 'Showman or Shaman? The Jeremiah *Lehrstücke*'. Both essays are that particular kind of critical review that attempt to restage (in modern idioms) the audacity and strangeness of the original performance. Both take the prophetic 'dramas' well 'Off Broadway' though down different streets (one towards queer performance art, and the other towards Brecht). Hornsby directs Ezekiel (uncomfortably – but then he's always uncomfortable) to lie down alongside performance artists like Karen Finley, Annie Sprinkle, Bill T. Jones and Janine Antoni – as if trying to find a contemporary correlate for the shocking positions that he was forced to assume on his biblical first night. Brummitt uses his RADA training to take Jeremiah's 'Pot' and 'Loincloth' pieces into the realm of radical defamiliarisation and teaching-plays in which actor and spectators blur and one finds oneself as 'audience' on stage. Both performances question a theatrical analogy based on the 'weakest form of bourgeois spectacle' that presumes unidirectional communication between the active performer and passive spectator-receiver. As Brummitt puts it, they move beyond the reductive theatrical model of a divinely directed 'theological ventriloquist act' with 'the prophet perched on the divine right arm'. In 'Crown of Thorns', William Stewart looks at Rachel Griffiths' 1997 'art installation, one woman protest' as a postmodern pastiche, or collage, referencing, among other things, Lady Godiva and Jesus of Nazareth, and then considers Jesus's temple destruction as a performance piece. In 'Earth Actions', Benjamin Morse sees Isaiah 44 (not usually part of the repertoire of prophetic performance pieces) as itself a redactional collage which, reconceived as 'art object', can be placed alongside Ana Mendieta's work which lies (often literally) in those liminal spaces between earth and body and 'performance' and 'art'. Stewart explores the wounded and naked body as a form of social protest. Expanding the categories that preside over this collection, Morse uses the unlikely conversation between Ana and Isaiah to investigate earth and exile as forces for decentering Zion, Jerusalem and land.

In the mid- to late-nineties, I felt somewhat alone in my forays into prophetic performance art (and well I might have been with titles like 'Prophetic Scatology'). These four pieces move the conversation on from my earlier (rather amateurish) soliloquies and are all the more interesting to me for having their own direction and script. They form part of a nascent body of work that offers alternatives to a centred and centrist Bible by perceiving alliances between the Bible and the margins – all those forces that contemporary society still finds extremely hard to assimilate and process as a 'norm', and that somehow stubbornly resist the dominant cultural idea of the Bible as ally of centripetal theological and academic force. In contrast to the kind of work that happily enlists the Prophets for the 'contestation of social norms' (the kind of thing that theologians and biblical scholars have always wanted Prophets to do, and acknowledged that they do – in moderation) these essays seek out ways to enact and rewrite the shock of prophetic spectacle, without neutralising the element of 'wacko nuttiness or exhibitionism' – or otherness, which is also (theologically speaking) the persistent abnormality of divinity as biblical theologies conceive it. The otherness that they intimate is more than the overthrowing of social injustice and dominant cultures – that most readily acceptable of overthrows (in principle at least). Coming from still relatively new academic worlds which attempt to reflect the fact that no-one inhabits worlds of pure Bible, where Bible is the only discourse, or the only spectacle, these are reperformances and

re-directions from spectators who are not just spectators or receivers. Rather than using performance as an illustrative extra for a uni-directional message addressed by Bibles to societies, they place fragments of the Bible alongside fragments of the contemporary in a quest for a relationship of *mutual* exegesis and – in ways more developed by some contributors than others – critique.

Yvonne Sherwood, Guest Editor, December 2005

REFERENCES

- Runions, Erin. 'Zion is burning: Genderfuck and hybridity in Micah and *Paris is Burning*'. *How Hysterical: Identification and Resistance in the Bible and Film*. New York: Palgrave; 2003. pp. 93–114.
- Sherwood, Yvonne. *The Prostitute and the Prophet. Reading Hosea in the Late Twentieth Century*. London: T & T Clark/Continuum; 1996; repr. 2004 (esp. pp. 102–106; pp. 115–118).
- Sherwood, Yvonne. 'Prophetic scatology: Prophecy and the art of sensation'. In *Search of the Present: The Bible through Cultural Studies (Semeia 82)*. Stephen D. Moore. Atlanta: Scholar's Press; 2000. pp. 183–224.
- Stone, Ken. 2001. 'Lovers and raisin cakes: Food, sex and divine insecurity in Hosea'. *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*. Ken Stone, ed. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press; 2001.

Cite this article as: Sherwood, Yvonne. 'Prophetic performance Art'. *The Bible and Critical Theory*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2006. pp. 1.1–1.4. DOI: 10.2104/bc060001.