Convinced that the end of the world was at hand, many Romantic women writers assumed the role of the female prophet to sound the alarm before the final curtain fell. Orianne Smith argues that their prophecies were performative acts in which the prophet believed herself to be authorized by God to bring about social or religious transformation through her words. Utilizing a wealth of archival material across a wide range of historical documents, including sermons, prophecies, letters, and diaries, Orianne Smith explores the work of prominent women writers – from Hester Piozzi to Ann Radcliffe, from Helen Maria Williams to Anna Barbauld and Mary Shelley – through the lens of their prophetic influence. As this book demonstrates, Romantic women writers not only thought in millenarian terms, but they did so in a way that significantly alters our current critical view of the relations between gender, genre, and literary authority in this period.

Orianne Smith is an Associate Professor of the Department of English at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Her edition of Mary Robinson’s *Hubert de Sevrac, A Romance of the Eighteenth Century* (1796) was published in 2009.
This series aims to foster the best new work in one of the most challenging fields within English literary studies. From the early 1780s to the early 1830s a formidable array of talented men and women took to literary composition, not just in poetry, which some of them famously transformed, but in many modes of writing. The expansion of publishing created new opportunities for writers, and the political stakes of what they wrote were raised again by what Wordsworth called those “great national events” that were “almost daily taking place”: the French Revolution, the Napoleonic and American wars, urbanization, industrialization, religious revival, an expanded empire abroad, and the reform movement at home. This was an enormous ambition, even when it pretended otherwise. The relations between science, philosophy, religion, and literature were reworked in texts such as *Frankenstein* and *Biographia Literaria*; gender relations in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Don Juan*; journalism by Cobbett and Hazlitt; poetic form, content, and style by the Lake School and the Cockney School. Outside Shakespeare studies, probably no body of writing has produced such a wealth of comment or done so much to shape the responses of modern criticism. This indeed is the period that saw the emergence of those notions of “literature” and of literary history, especially national literary history, on which modern scholarship in English has been founded.

The categories produced by Romanticism have also been challenged by recent historicist arguments. The task of the series is to engage both with a challenging corpus of Romantic writings and with the changing field of criticism they have helped to shape. As with other literary series published by Cambridge, this one will represent the work of both younger and more established scholars, on either side of the Atlantic and elsewhere.

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For my daughter Annalise
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