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978-1-107-02706-0 - Romantic Women Writers, Revolution, and Prophecy:

Rebellious Daughters, 1786–1826

Orianne Smith

Excerpt

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Introduction: reading and writing the end of the world

[W]hatever God may or may not be – living, dead, or merely ailing – religion is a social institution, worship a social activity, and faith a social force. To trace the pattern of their changes is neither to collect relics of revelation nor to assemble a chronicle of error. It is to write a social history of the imagination.

Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*

Romantic Women Writers, Revolution, and Prophecy explores the connections between revolution and prophecy in the work of British Romantic women writers, placing their visionary claims within the context of a rich tradition of female prophecy and the ongoing debate regarding the merits and perils of enthusiasm in the long eighteenth century. In the first few years of the Romantic era, women writers tended to draw almost exclusively on a Christian tradition of female prophecy, which was explicitly political and revolutionary. The political prophecies of Romantic women writers during the 1790s had a precedent in the Civil War decades when a series of sectarian female prophets in England – compelled by the urgency of the moment – launched themselves into the public sphere, offered themselves as intermediaries between God and His people, and interpreted contemporary political events as the catastrophic ushering in of the Last Days predicted in the book of Revelation. This book argues that similar millenarian expectations sweeping through England after the French Revolution prompted many Romantic women writers to appropriate this earlier model of the female prophet in their poetry and prose. Towards the end of the Romantic period there was a distinct shift from Christian to pagan models of visionary discourse in works by women writers who no longer felt obliged to confine themselves to Christian sources for their visionary claims. As a product of Enlightenment ideas about individual potential blended with a belief in God's manifest presence in our lives, the revolutionary potential of female prophecy had become an

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anachronism, and a source of nostalgia, for second-generation Romantic women writers.

More than an authorizing strategy, the tradition of female prophecy gave Romantic women writers an historical and biblical precedent for their prophecies in a time of profound social and political upheaval. Providing fresh interpretations of the works and careers of Hester Lynch Piozzi, Helen Maria Williams, Ann Radcliffe, Anna Barbauld, and Mary Shelley, *Romantic Women Writers, Revolution, and Prophecy* offers a reassessment of some of our key critical assumptions about Romantic women writers and their contributions to public life. There is still a widely held assumption amongst many Romantic-era scholars that the people competing to be world-historical individuals during this period were, by and large, all men – men such as Napoleon, Hegel, and Wordsworth, who were actively engaged in fundamentally transforming the world of politics, philosophy, and literature. Reading the political prophecies of Romantic women writers enables a different story to emerge. Like the self-styled male poet-prophets, Romantic women writers who represented themselves as visionaries were confident in the transformative potential of their published prophecies. Unlike many of their male counterparts, however, these female authors positioned their visionary works as ethical interventions in the destiny of humankind. Piozzi and Radcliffe were members of the Church of England; Barbauld was a Dissenter; Williams was raised a Presbyterian; and, despite her husband's atheism, Shelley believed in God, although she rejected institutionalized Christianity. These differences had a direct influence on their eschatological interpretations of contemporary events. Yet all of the women writers in my study shared an understanding of their prophetic mission as a moral imperative to articulate God's message at this critical juncture of sacred and secular history.

Convinced that they were living in a period of spiritual and political crisis, many Romantic women writers assumed the mantle of the female prophet to sound the alarm before the final curtain fell. *Romantic Women Writers, Revolution, and Prophecy* argues that their prophecies were performative speech acts in which the prophet believed herself to be authorized by God to bring about a social or religious transformation as she was speaking. Speech-act theory provides an especially fruitful way of thinking through the contributions of women writers to the prophetic discourse of their day because it clearly separates the writer/prophet from the illocutionary force of her words, and enables us to develop a better sense of the complex and shifting relationship between Romantic women writers, their critics, and their audiences. Romantic women writers and their readers believed that their published prophecies could make or unmake

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their world. To say that how to do things with words was a particular concern in the Romantic period is stating the obvious; as this book demonstrates, how words can do things (with or without our consent or the control of authorities) was an equally pressing matter.

ROMANTIC MILLENARIANISM AND THE FEMALE
TRADITION OF PROPHECY

Many Britons at the end of the eighteenth century interpreted the French Revolution as an act of divine judgment that signaled the unfolding of God's plan for his people in the Last Days. For instance, William Button, the author of *Prophetic Conjectures on the French Revolution* (1793):

The world subsists by revolutions. Good men, indeed, should be cautious of promoting such as are needless; and may tremble at the most necessary: but if the voice from heaven cry "REVOLUTION!" in vain would all the powers upon earth attempt to arrest the motions of these wheels. They shall go round till every sacred prediction is accomplished; till the last event in the plan of Providence is brought to pass.¹

Thirty years later, attempting to describe the feelings of exhilaration and utopian expectations generated by the Revolution, Robert Southey wrote: "Few persons but those who have lived in it, can conceive or comprehend what the meaning of the French Revolution was, nor what a visionary world seemed to open upon those who were just entering it. Old things seemed passing away, and nothing was dreamed of but the regeneration of the human race."² In the wake of the Revolution, Britons like Button, Southey, and many more believed they were witnessing the end of history and looked to the future with breathless anticipation.

The widespread belief that the French Revolution signaled the end of the world predicted in scripture created the need for eschatological interpretations of the Revolution and, perhaps more importantly, predictions about what would happen next. The paradigm for reading revolution as the end of the world during the Romantic period was St. John of Patmos's political vision of the overthrow of human governance and its replacement with divine authority. The Apocalypse – with its root meaning of to "disclose" or "uncover" – is unveiled to the author of the book of Revelation as a spiritual revolution that begins in our world as a series of violent battles pitting Christ against unbelievers and the dominion of the Antichrist. The collision of the sacred and the secular at the end of history is what gives the last book of scripture its political significance. The urgency of St. John's message – "The time is at hand" – forces readers to measure his prophecy against contemporary secular history and

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to interpret recent political and social upheavals as the ushering in of Armageddon (Revelation 1:3).

At the end of the eighteenth century many Britons believed that this time had come. After 1789, England witnessed a resurgence of millenarianism unlike anything since the proliferation of published prophecies during the Civil War. Prophecies were published as street literature in broadsheets, chapbooks, and almanacs, but also in weighty treatises: the Dissenting publisher Joseph Johnson published over thirty books of contemporary eschatology. Cashing in on the market, collections of prophecies from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were excerpted and republished anonymously. So many prophecies were published that the *Monthly Review* created a separate heading, “Modern Prophecy,” in order to review them.³

Although people throughout Europe interpreted the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars as signs that the world was teetering on the brink of divinely ordained annihilation, the notion of the end of time – and the beginning of eternity – contradicted everything they knew from their sensory experience of the world. As Immanuel Kant noted in his essay, “The End of All Things” (1794), the idea that human history was about to end brought with it mingled feelings of horror and fascination: “There is something appalling in this thought because it leads, as it were, to the brink of an abyss, and for him who sinks into it, no return is possible ... And yet there is something alluring in it: for people cannot resist turning their frightened gaze ever anew toward eternity.”⁴ The powerful appeal of the end of human history was the invitation to imagine the beginning of a new millennium, the content of which was open to interpretation. Philosophers, scientists, poets, clergymen, and some of the most influential thinkers of the age felt compelled to clarify God’s message at this critical moment in human history.

British women as well as men rose to this challenge. Romantic women writers from a wide variety of political, social, and religious affiliations confidently appropriated the role of the God-sent prophet in a period of crisis. For instance, Anna Barbauld, writing in the wake of the Revolution:

Can ye not discern the signs of the times? The minds of men are in movement from the Borythenes to the Atlantic. Agitated with new and strong emotions, they swell and heave beneath oppression, as the seas within the polar circle, when, at the approach of spring, they grow impatient to burst their icy chains; when what, but an instant before, seemed so firm, – spread for many a dreary league like a floor of solid marble, – at once with a tremendous noise gives way, long fissures spread in every direction, and the air resounds with the clash of

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floating fragments, which every hour are broken from the mass. The genius of Philosophy is walking abroad.⁵

Like Percy Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," Barbauld's *An Address to the Opposers* (1790) posits the idea of revolution as a spontaneous eruption of mental energy – an event as natural as the changing seasons – demonstrating an accord between providential design and political events. In "Ode to the West Wind," Shelley deliberately invokes the Miltonic figure of the poet-prophet leading the nation in an era of political and spiritual crisis. In *An Address to the Opposers*, and in her other political prophecies of the 1790s, Barbauld assumes a similar vatic stance, launching into radical political prophecy with the cool confidence of a Shelley or a Milton. Poised on the brink of Apocalypse, Barbauld declares her privileged authorial status as God's messenger at the end of the world.

In this perceived moment of crisis, Barbauld's identity as a prophet won out over her identity as a woman. As the pages that follow demonstrate, her disregard for ordinary gendered expectations in extraordinary times had a history. *Romantic Women Writers, Revolution, and Prophecy* situates the poetry and prose of Romantic women writers and millenarian thinkers like Barbauld within the recent historical context of the radical prophetesses who emerged during the Civil War. These seventeenth-century female prophets based their claims to prophetic ability not on sudden revelation, but on their in-depth knowledge of scripture and the contemporary notion of the "ungendered soul," which granted women an equality with men in spiritual matters denied to them in day-to-day life. Calling themselves the handmaids of God, many of these women visionaries cited a passage from Joel to assert their rights to publish and prophesy in a period of revolution: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and daughters shall prophesy ... and also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit" (2.28–29). The link for British citizens between the overthrow of the monarchy and the cataclysmic biblical events leading up to the Apocalypse gave these visionaries and their supporters an opportunity to argue for the propriety of their political prophecies during the Last Days.

Some Romantic-period women writers like Barbauld used this exemplar of the "reasonable" prophetess, engaging in biblical exegesis and speaking out in a time of revolution, to justify their own active participation in visionary discourse. The concept of the ungendered soul, considerably weakened in the eighteenth century, was revived briefly immediately after the events of 1789, when writers of both sexes celebrated the French

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Revolution as a harbinger of a new millennium. But the pervasive belief that prophecy was gender-neutral changed abruptly after England went to war with France in 1793. Women writers who appropriated the model of the female prophet in their written work became objects of derision for Britons protective of the status quo and fearful of the contagion of revolution. Yet the attempts by Romantic women writers to engage in political prophecy despite the growing climate of suspicion points to the enduring influence and resilience of the female prophetic tradition. What distinguishes the prophecies of these women writers from other types of politically or socially engaged writing of the time is the shared conviction that their words were divinely inspired, and their belief that they were, in effect, speaking for God. Their unwillingness to relinquish the role of the prophet suggests the continued potency of the prophetic tradition for women with strong religious convictions and an equally strong belief in their abilities to articulate God's will in a time of social and political crisis.

My use of the word "tradition" here and elsewhere is deliberate. The idea of tradition – what it was and what our attitude to it should be – was a central issue in the vigorous and heated debate over the ideological and political implications of the social contract during this period. Edmund Burke's spirited defense of tradition in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) hinged on a very specific definition of tradition as a set of cherished beliefs or customs that it is our duty to preserve intact for generations to come. Burke's *Reflections* argued for the preservation of a patriarchal tradition (which included respect for a divinely sanctioned hierarchy of rank and property in Britain over and above claims for universal rights), and attempted to persuade Britons that this tradition was the legacy of their ancestors and should be protected as such. For Burke, defending tradition meant preserving civil liberties as "an entailed inheritance derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity."⁶ Burke based his view of Britain's hard-won civil liberties as divine primogeniture on a story of origins that began with the Norman Conquest and the balance between executive power and civil rights written into Magna Carta, which was reiterated in the 1689 Bill of Rights.

The tradition of female prophecy provided an alternative story of origins. In contrast to Burke's patriarchal notion of tradition passed down from "our forefathers," this tradition traced a matrilineal genealogy of female authority that some British women writers used to position themselves as the appropriate vehicle for God's message in a time of need. According to Burke's reading, the concept of tradition is in itself an

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argument against social and political change; for Burke, tradition is a gift from God that must be accepted unconditionally. As Karl Popper reminds us, however, Burke's insistence on the necessity of passively accepting and preserving tradition, as persuasive as it is, is not the only choice we have. It is also possible to take a critical view of tradition; to reject it; and even, in rare instances, to create another tradition that challenges the hallowed grounds upon which the earlier tradition rests.⁷ The British tradition of female prophecy was one of these rare instances: a tradition that emerged as a radical rejection of the gendered biases and limitations of Burke's model of a static, hierarchical society.

The tradition of female prophecy challenged Burke's genealogy of male citizenship by pointing to a long history of female prophetic activity throughout the ages. In addition to women's immediate predecessors in the seventeenth century, the Bible provided ample evidence of female prophecy. Biblical women visionaries include Miriam, the sister of Moses; Hannah, the mother of Samuel; Deborah, the only woman judge of Israel; Huldah, the wife of Shallum; and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, who recognized Mary as the mother of God. The most famous classical female prophets that Mary Shelley and other second-generation Romantic women writers drew upon included the Pythian and Cumaean sibyls – priestesses of Apollo who delivered the gods' message to people who came to consult the oracle at Delphi and Cumae – and Cassandra, to whom Apollo gave the power of prophecy but then decreed that no one would believe her when she refused to satisfy his desire. Despite this plethora of sacred and secular examples of female visionary discourse, the historical trajectory of the tradition of female prophecy was decidedly not organic or continuous: on the contrary, its cultural position was precarious and unstable. Romantic women writers who chose to speak as visionaries did so fully aware that they were aligning themselves with a tradition that existed on the margins of what was considered reasonable discourse. Exploring how and why each of these women writers risked themselves and their reputations in order to participate in this tradition is one of the primary objectives of this book.

The active participation of women writers in eschatological interpretations of contemporary events throughout the Romantic period deepens our understanding of the opportunities for Romantic women writers to contribute to public life. The appeal of millenarianism to marginalized groups in periods of severe social and political instability has been fruitfully explored by a number of twentieth-century historians, sociologists, and literary scholars, but the motivation for women has yet to be fully

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investigated. In *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957), Norman Cohn discusses how the desire of the poor in medieval Europe to improve their lives inspired the millenarian sects that sprang up between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries.⁸ In *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972), the historian Christopher Hill specifically links seventeenth-century millenarianism in England to class conflict and the need for the laboring classes to believe that they would be released from their present suffering in a new millennium.⁹ E. P. Thompson makes a similar point in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1966) when he attributes the spread of millenarian thinking in England in the early nineteenth century to “the chiliasm of despair” experienced by working-class Britons struggling with poverty and an uncertain economic future at the outset of the Industrial Revolution.¹⁰

More recently, Malcolm Bull has argued that the emphasis on class oppression and class conflict as the primary catalysts for millenarianism needs to be broadened to include other groups who are frustrated in their need for recognition and desire to contribute to society. In *Seeing Things Hidden* (1999), Bull makes the important point that millenarian thinking does not merely involve the (hoped-for) transgression of societal boundaries, but envisions the eventual transcendence of binary oppositions between groups of people and the resulting naturalized social hierarchies.¹¹ For the Romantic women writers in this study, the belief that they were witnessing the end of the world, and the beginning of a new millennium, carried with it the hope that many of the former strictures against women in the public sphere would end as well.

My investigation of the influence of millenarian thinking and the British tradition of female prophecy on the literary work of Romantic-era women writers builds on significant research over the past decade by Linda Colley, Gary Kelly, Claudia Johnson, Adriana Craciun, and others on the intersection between politics and women’s writing.¹² Although anxiety about the role of women in society was palpable in the second half of the eighteenth century, as Colley reminds us, “separate sexual spheres were being increasingly prescribed in theory, yet increasingly broken down in practice. The half-century after the American war would witness a marked expansion in the range of British women’s public and patriotic activities, as well as changes in how those activities were viewed and legitimized.”¹³ These activities included what Patricia Comitini describes as the practice of “vocational philanthropy” by women writers like Hannah More and Mary Wollstonecraft. As Comitini notes, both of these writers used their pens to introduce a “model of moral and benevolent

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womanhood,” inculcating and encouraging a particular type of feminine benevolence amongst their female audiences.¹⁴ More’s passionate efforts to abolish the slave trade as well as her work to educate the poor were driven by her commitment to Anglican Evangelicalism, a movement that explicitly endorsed women’s participation in moral education and instruction. Although Wollstonecraft’s feminist polemic was shaped by the kind of revolutionary politics that More vociferously condemned, like More, Wollstonecraft also sought to educate her female readers to become active, useful, and morally responsible citizens. The rise of philanthropy amongst women writers in the late eighteenth century is one example of the breakdown between the theory and practice of the notion of separate spheres. Romantic millenarianism provides another significant example. Not surprisingly, deeply religious writers like More and Wollstonecraft, who believed that they had an ethical imperative to change the world through their writing, were similarly attracted to and assumed the role of the prophet. For these two women, and the other women writers in the chapters that follow, religious conviction and the belief that they held the key to unlocking the mysteries of divine prophecy provided a catalyst for their contributions to political discourse.

A long-standing critical consensus has established the significance of Christianity in Romantic literature;¹⁵ however, my analysis challenges the argument that Romantic-era poetry and prose marked the beginning of the erosion and internalization of religious belief assumed by M. H. Abrams’s description of the movement from an early modern “faith in an apocalypse by revelation” to a “faith in an apocalypse by revolution” that “gave way to faith in an apocalypse by imagination or cognition.”¹⁶ Using Wordsworth as an exemplar, Abrams argues that

[t]he tendency in innovative Romantic thought ... is greatly to diminish, and at the extreme to eliminate, the role of God, leaving as the prime agencies man and the world, mind and nature, the ego and the non-ego, and self and the not-self, spirit and the other, or (in the favorite antithesis of post-Kantian philosophers) subject and object ... The notable fact, however, is that this metaphysical process does not delete but simply assimilates the traditional powers and actions of God, as well as the overall pattern of Christian history ... In this grandiose enterprise, however, it is the subject, mind or spirit which is primary and takes over the initiative and functions which had once been the prerogatives of deity.¹⁷

As Jerome McGann rightly notes, Abrams’s particular emphasis on the despair experienced by Wordsworth and Coleridge when the French Revolution failed to live up to its promise dominated his discussion of the privatization of religious belief in Romantic-era poetry and was, in many

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ways, as much a reflection of his own ideological commitments, and his selective examples of works and poets, as a critique of Romanticism in general.¹⁸ However, McGann's assertion that Romantic poets withdrew from social reality by mapping political crisis onto a spiritual plane also depends upon the same myth of the gradual yet inevitable secularization of British literature at the end of the eighteenth century. Like Abrams, McGann's argument is limited to – and therefore, in some respects, limited by – a discussion of the ideological imperatives that shaped the work of the canonical male poets. My own focus on the politics of British millenarianism in the work of Romantic-era women writers complicates both Abrams's argument that Romantic poets appropriated divine authority and McGann's assertion that the articulation of religious belief in Romantic literature necessarily signaled a retreat from political crisis.

Recent studies have begun to heighten our awareness of the influence of religion and apocalyptic thinking on literary activity in England in the Romantic period, but the link between women writers and millenarian discourse remains largely unexamined.¹⁹ One reason for this is that gender assumptions in existing scholarship have obscured the participation of Romantic women writers in apocalyptic and visionary discourse. Anne Mellor argues emphatically against the possibility that Romantic women writers engaged in millenarian thinking: millenarian speculation, with its emphasis on cataclysmic events signaling and leading up to the end of the world, is antithetical to what Mellor describes as the “feminine mode of thought,” which, closely aligned to motherhood, conceives of the evolution of the individual and society as progressive, linear, and continuous.²⁰ Ian Balfour agrees with Mellor when he states that “prophecy is almost invariably a male (and masculine) phenomenon.” Although Balfour notes that scholarship over the past few decades has unearthed significant evidence of female prophecy in England during the Civil War decades, he asserts that “no real tradition of women writing prophecy continued through to the Romantic period.”²¹

But Mellor and Balfour are wrong. Gender roles and sexual difference certainly influenced the ways in which women writers in the Romantic era thought of themselves, but arguments that tether female experience exclusively to the experience of motherhood, as Mellor does, or deny Romantic women's engagement in prophecy altogether, as Balfour does, elide the stories of many women, and distract critics from formulating potentially less limiting ways of discussing how women perceived themselves and their society. Indeed, as this book demonstrates, Romantic women writers not only thought in millenarian terms, but they did so