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Lake Methodism

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Chapter 5

Joanna Southcott's Body, and the Posthumous Life of Romantic Prophecy

We don't read Joanna Southcott much today, a testament to the resounding finality with which Regency England buried her. A Devon upholsterer's servant turned latter-day Sibyl, who at the age of sixty-five mistook a fatal dropsy for a divinely authored pregnancy (and so captivated a nation), Southcott was interred by the *Times* in December 1814 with a sigh of palpable, and typical, relief: "the scandalous delusion which has for several months disgraced the metropolis, and even the character of the times we live in, is now at an end."¹ Twelve days later, the repressed was yet to return, secured as she was with anxiously adamant chains. As part of its continuing coverage-*cum*-quarantine, the *Times* reported that after "dissection on Saturday se'nnight, the body was put in a plain coffin. . . . When the lid was screwed down, pitch was applied to the edges and rim."² Seizing all London's embarrassed attention—to say nothing of inducing a crisis in the "character of the times"—

1. *Times*, December 28, 1814, p. 3, col. b.

2. *Times*, January 9, 1815, p. 3, col. c.

was no small feat, yet the emphatic period of the *Times* has remained uncontested. Working on Southcott today can seem like an unwelcome exhumation.

She's largely absent from critical bibliographies, though the recent writing of Susan Juster, Debbie Lee, Helen Thomas, and Kevin Binfield are important exceptions, and apart from Fiona Robertson's *Women's Writing 1778–1838*, she has no representation in any anthology I'm aware of.³ Even some of the most valuable studies of Romantic-era prophecy have little to say about her. For Anne Mellor, Southcott is the exception who proves the rule that “the female imagination during the Romantic period on the whole [was] *not* inspired by millenarian, apocalyptic thinking,” since apocalypse was “antithetical to . . . the ‘feminine mode of thought’ in the Romantic period.”⁴ Morton Paley's *Apocalypse and Millennium*

3. Susan Juster, *Doomsayers*; Debbie Lee, *Romantic Liars: Obscure Women Who Became Impostors and Challenged an Empire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 21–78; Helen Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives*, 50–60; Kevin Binfield, “The French, ‘the long-wished-for Revolution,’ and the Just War in Joanna Southcott,” in *Rebellious Hearts: British Women Writers and the French Revolution*, ed. Kari Lokke and Adriana Craciun (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 135–59. See also *Women's Writing, 1778–1838: An Anthology*, ed. Fiona Robertson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Joseph Lew considers the millenarianism of Richard Brothers and Southcott in “God's Sister: History and Ideology in *Valperga*,” in *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond “Frankenstein,”* ed. Audrey A. Fisch, Anne K. Mellor, Esther H. Schor (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 159–81. Tim Marshall, in *Murdering to Dissect: Grave-Robbing, “Frankenstein,” and the Anatomy of Literature* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), somewhat problematically argues “that the Creature's part in the story, particularly as it affects Justine, can plausibly be read as a reworking of some key elements of the sensational ‘Southcottian’ controversy” (189).

4. Anne K. Mellor, “Blake, the Apocalypse, and Romantic Women Writers,” 139–52 (140). In Mellor's view, a “female apocalypse” is an oxymoron, since apocalypse marks a “conception of time . . . as breakable, rupturable, full of gaps and holes,” ultimately derived from masculine physiology, which experiences reproduction “through a process of ejaculation and separation. . . . In other words, the male birth process is one of creation and complete rupture” (141). This is a provocative intervention, but the embodied and somewhat essentialist argument, though explicitly limited to the Romantic period, seems to me an inevitably trans-historical assertion, as well. It's also in unexamined tension with the very long history of women's religious practice in England. Keith Thomas argues that as women were excluded from conventional forms of spiritual and cultural authority, they tended to gravitate toward eccentric versions of both throughout the early modern period; well into the seventeenth century, “recourse to prophecy was the only means by which most women could hope to disseminate their opinions on public events.” Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), 138. The abiding interest of women in prophetic writing is powerfully narrated in Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Orianna Smith, “Unlearned & Ill-Qualified Pokers into Prophecy”: Hester Lynch Piozzi and

invests in precursors, rather than contemporaries, situating canonical male poets “in appropriating, recasting, and radically revising material from the text of John of Patmos,” while for Ian Balfour, “her writing is of quite a different character from that of the writers considered” by *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, and so Southcott disappears after the second footnote.⁵

These accidental absences and strategic dismissals are understandable. Southcott’s writing is hard to like, harder to make sense of. Her most attentive and generous critic concedes, “Southcott did not make it easy for those of us who wish to see in her voluminous writings a critical and discerning intelligence at work.”⁶ Her prophetic books, a hodgepodge of prose and poetry, were sometimes tame, as when she forecast the weather—which, contemporaries sniggered, was rather like prophesying with the net down, as twenty out of twenty-two harvests failed in Southcott’s Devonshire between 1793 and 1814.⁷ They were sometimes rather more ambitious, as she consistently cast herself as a mixture of Eve, Mary, and the “Woman Clothed with the Sun,” in whom all of history stood complete: here was “a mystery which no man can explain. If it began with the woman at first, it must end with her at last.”⁸ Regardless of scope, her visions were usually ridiculous, and rarely sublime, prompting one modern critic to quip that “Joanna’s characteristic tone is often more petulant than prophetic.”⁹

This is an old game. Crafting the most elegant sneer at the unremitting awfulness of Southcott’s writing has been a competition among her polite readers for a long time, serving to patrol the boundary between coarse enthusiasms and clerical sensibilities. But this boundary has proven unstable, and genteel critique sometimes identifies with what it condemns.

the Female Prophetic Tradition,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 28.2 (2004): 87–112; Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Deborah Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters: Female Preaching and Popular Religion in Industrial England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

5. Morton D. Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 5. Ian Balfour, *Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, 288n2.

6. Juster, *Doomsayers*, 256.

7. On agriculture in Devonshire, see James K. Hopkins, *A Woman to Deliver Her People*, 69.

8. Joanna Southcott, *Prophecies Announcing the Birth of the Prince of Peace* (London: W. Marchant, 1814), 3.

9. Morton D. Paley, “William Blake, The Prince of the Hebrews, and the Woman Clothed with the Sun,” in *William Blake: Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes*, ed. Morton D. Paley and Michael Phillips (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), 260–93 (281).

Robert Southey's putdown of Southcott is surely best-in-show, but it's also nearly undone by the rabid energy she seems to arouse, as it abominates her "rhapsody of texts, vulgar dreams and vulgar interpretations, vulgar types and vulgar applications: the vilest string of words in the vilest doggerel verse, which has no other connection than what the vilest rhymes have suggested."¹⁰ The vigor of Southey's assault comes from something more complicated than mere contempt. For vulgar and vile though they may have been, Southcott's prophecies also humbled the circulation figures of most everyone other than Byron and Scott, moving more than 100,000 copies between 1802 and 1815, according to biographer James K. Hopkins.¹¹ Her texts were aggressively priced—three shillings at the most, four-pence for brief pamphlets—and like most books, drifted far beyond their original purchasers. Demand was such that overuse may have compromised the resale market, with at least one bookseller complaining that "almost all the copies were worn out at the time by continual thumbing and reading."¹²

As we'll see, Southcott's fame was peculiarly self-consuming. Her cheaply printed texts now tend to survive (when they exist at all) only in microfilm catalogues, and she sold well among a somewhat invisible demographic of people who couldn't afford many books, which may contribute to her total absence from either the narrative, or the vast apparatus, of William St. Clair's *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*.¹³ But her textual presence in late-Georgian culture was impressive—one of her prophecies went through nine editions of 1,000 copies each, while seventeen others went into multiple editions; forty-eight more sold through only single editions of 1,000 copies.¹⁴ Contemporaries registered her as an overwhelmingly palpable presence, a leaning tower of Babel toppling over on its readers, and Southey joked that he had braved bodily danger, collecting "for you some account of this woman and her system, from a pile of pamphlets half a yard high."¹⁵ Southey's mock-heroics are from 1807, by which time there was already sustained interest in Southcott's prophecies, but after her annunciation of Shiloh, the Prince of Peace, even Bonaparte was forgotten. In the autumn of 1814, an unauthorized biog-

10. Robert Southey, *Letters from England*, ed. Jack Simmons (London: Cresset, 1951), 437.

11. Hopkins, *A Woman*, 84.

12. Hopkins, *A Woman*, 85.

13. William St. Clair, *Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*.

14. Hopkins, *A Woman*, 84.

15. Southey, *Letters from England*, 434.

raphy went through eleven editions in a matter of weeks, and the *Sunday Monitor*, taking stock of the public's interest, devoted itself full-time to all things Joanna, as "in every street, alley, court, and house, nothing was heard but the name of Southcott," the fact that "the fate of Europe [was] about to be decided" notwithstanding.¹⁶

So if Southcott doesn't matter much to our understanding of early nineteenth-century British culture, she mattered very much indeed to that culture, and even beyond it. While lying-in in 1814, she entertained one "Monsieur Assalini, Professor of Midwifery in Paris, and Accoucheur to the Empress of France," along with "General Orloff, Aide-de-camp to the Emperor of Russia," who "treated the old lady with great respect, making a very low obeisance."¹⁷ Southcott certainly worked hard to make herself matter, undertaking (according to William Cobbett) a daring public-relations program meant to capture the tastemakers: "She sent a copy of her book, with her portrait, in which the circumstances attending her impregnation are detailed, to the Prince Regent, to the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, Bishop of Worcester, Duke of Gloucester, Lord Grovesnor, Lord Ellenborough, the Duke of Kent, the Bishop of London, and the Bishop of Salisbury."¹⁸ Anglican bishops would be hounded by Southcottians bearing pamphlets that demanded to be read, and boxes that demanded to be opened, until well after the First World War, but not all members of the peerage had their attention unwillingly conscripted: Byron's letters to John Murray of September 1814 show he was (at least idly) following the conflicting accounts of the "pregnancy" hawked by Southcott's doctors to the London newspapers.

In fact, Southcott's fame had spread throughout the Anglophone world, with coverage in Belfast, Philadelphia, and Boston, where the *Boston Spectator* saw fit to commission a running column (which seems to have meant that it would lift freely from Southey's *Letters from England*), since "Joanna Southcott is now the rage, and makes more noise in England, and commands more columns in their publick journals, than the Congress at Vienna, the negotiation at Ghent, or the war in America."¹⁹ By 1814, Southcott awoke to find herself famously pregnant, and her celebrity escaped the usual forms of authorship into unexpected cultural

16. *Sunday Monitor* (London), November 6 and September 11, 1814.

17. *Times*, January 9, 1815, p. 3, col. c.

18. *Cobbett's Political Register*, September 10, 1814, 330.

19. "Joanna Southcott," *Boston Spectator* 1.54 (January 7, 1815): 215–16. See also "Devotional Somnium," *Analectic Magazine* [Philadelphia] 5 (1815): 497–509 (500); "On Credulity," *Belfast Monthly Magazine* 3.12 (July 31, 1809): 20–23 (20).

organs. One of the most serious and sustained accounts of her life and writing was provided by *La Belle Assemblée* (a Regency *Cosmopolitan*), which sandwiched two long, theologically focused essays between advice on fabrics, a “Description of an Autumnal Walking Dress,” and an essay on “Slippers,” in order “to gratify the curiosity of our fair readers, all of whom must have heard, of late, so many wonderful, and, we are sorry to see, so many *indelicate*, stories about this *heavenly upholsterer*.”²⁰ Very few Romantic-era writers would achieve public attention so intense it could be found in even the most casual locations, and her very celebrity had begun to stymie her readers. Cobbett opened a would-be review in September 1814, shrugging that “the works of this *inspired* maiden have, in fact, been bought up with such avidity, that, admitting I were inclined to look into them, my bookseller says a copy of them is not to be had for love nor money.”²¹

My subject is Cobbett's Southcott: the center of so much gossip she vanishes from the record, the object of so much talk she can't be read. I want to get at some of the mechanics behind her astonishing success, and even more astonishing disappearance. My argument isn't that we should be reading Southcott now, but why we aren't. Southcott matters, because her writing—however feeble, flat, and stupid it's usually held to be—contaminates some of the poetically potent and socially estimable systems of the Romantic era. She was one of the most commercially successful instances of “high romantic argument,” that cluster of visionary power and prophetic utterance, divine inspiration and ecstatic transcendence. Southcott's England was one in which *The Prelude* and *Home at Grasmere* were unpublished, as were the lofty arguments of the *Defence of Poetry*; Keats was unread, Blake entirely unknown, and Coleridge, as I argued in the last chapter, a farcical wreck, whose attempt to resuscitate his career in 1816 was brutalized by Hazlitt in the *Edinburgh Review* as dangerously Joannian.

It was Southcott, neither polite, nor male, nor much of an authority, who had the copyright on the language of inspiration in Regency England. But for the accidents of textual history, this claim could seem very near a commonplace. *Don Juan*, the best-selling poem of the nineteenth century, opened its jibes at the popular productions of contemporary poetry alleging that *Lyrical Ballads* “is the sort of writing which has superseded and degraded Pope in the eyes of the discerning British Public, and

20. *La Belle Assemblée*, September 1814, 99.

21. *Cobbett's Political Register*, September 10, 1814, 327.

[Wordsworth] is the kind of Poet who, in the same manner that Joanna Southcote found many thousand people to take her dropsy for the God Almighty re-impregnated, has found some hundreds of persons to misbelieve his insanities.”²² Here is an almost-allegory for Southcott’s almost-fame. Mediating the intersection between Byron and Wordsworth, she also disappears from the records of either—this “Preface” to *Don Juan* was suppressed until 1901, and both the poem she inaugurated, and the romanticism she was made to frame, were received without her. But this wasn’t a thoughtlessly casual identification for Byron, whose pet-name for the poet-prophet Percy Shelley was the coyly Joannian “*Shiloh*,” and it’s worth recovering some of the defamiliarizing force of *Don Juan*’s introduction.²³

Southcott provides a kind of counter-romanticism, in conversation with familiar rhetorics, yet utterly shorn of their familiar social contexts and ideological commitments. Hers is a tragicomic medley where inspiration is inebriation, and prophetic vision demands optometric correction, as *La Belle Assemblée* rehearsed “her nonsense about the vision at midnight, *like a large bowl* (a punch-bowl no doubt), behind her candle, where there appeared a white hand coming from the bowl, when a voice told her, ‘fear not! It is I;—but there is something highly ludicrous in the spirit telling her *to put on her spectacles*, when the jolly dame began to *see double*, the candle appearing parted in two!”²⁴ This “argument” isn’t “high,” but “highly ludicrous,” and for the early nineteenth century, “prophecy” and “inspiration” weren’t the newly revived and gorgeously elevated tropes of an Oxbridge elite, but what a contemporary called “the witless efflorescences of a distracted old woman.”²⁵ Pastiche or no, the spontaneous overflow of the corresponding breeze was hers, and it came as easily as leaves to the tree: it was her “still small voice, as a rustling wind, which dictates the whole of her writings, neither studied, nor submitted to subsequent alteration.”²⁶ These are common conceits, but as Hazlitt’s savaging of Coleridge suggests, any echoing correspondence between Southcott and a polite poet might seriously damage the gentleman. Southcott would never be much of a poet, and she abandoned the Wesleyans early in her career. But she was perhaps the Romantic period’s most important tributary of

22. Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 5:81–82.

23. On Percy as “Shiloh,” see Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium*, 195.

24. *La Belle Assemblée*, October 1814, 152.

25. D. Hughson, *The Life of Joanna Southcott* (London: S. A. Oddy, 1814), 4.

26. *Belfast Monthly Magazine*, “On Credulity,” 22.

“Lake Methodism,” the embodiment of the detour that funneled cultural and social privilege into semi-literate enthusiasm.

Resurrecting Southcott—and in particular, Southcott’s inappropriateness—offers an approach different from the scholarship that hears secularized echoes of Revelations or Milton in Romantic-era texts, or that insists that post-Enlightenment “prophecy” be understood as a rhetorical rather than literal system.²⁷ This reading of the prophetic—materially absent yet abstractly vital, a game of allusive cultural capital attaching poets to a respectable Christian and literary heritage—is compelling, but it’s only part of the story. It’s also a motivated formation produced by a polite Romantic culture eager to dissociate from the very real (and very contemporary, rather than decently Biblical or metaphorical) prophecies that sold extremely well from 1780 to 1820. Prophecy with a literally predictive agenda—a form with recognizable norms and codified conventions—at once dominated and embarrassed England in the wake of the French Revolution. It certainly attracted more attention than the (at times numbingly) scholastic exercises associated with the Warburton lectures on the prophetic, or the remotely Higher Criticism that “called into question the literal belief in prophecy and its fulfillment.”²⁸ To its casual consumers, of which there were ever more in the Romantic period, “prophecy” was at least as likely to mean Brothers and Southcott as Lowth and Hurd, and even its well-bred students could be alarmingly literal in their enthusiasms.

Take Spencer Perceval. In 1832, this son of the assassinated Prime Minister thundered on the floor of Parliament a Jeremiad against Reform and its plagues (cholera, he deduced). Reports of his shaking body and foaming mouth suggest the survival in even the most distinguished environment of deadly serious doom-saying:

27. Ian Balfour writes “there is hardly such a thing as prophecy in the sense of a clearly codified genre with definite contours . . . in European Romanticism generally. . . . It is usually more appropriate to speak of ‘the prophetic’ than prophecy, if the latter is a genre and the former a mode” (*Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, 1).

28. Elinor Shaffer, “Secular Apocalypse: Prophets and Apocalypticism at the End of the Eighteenth Century,” in *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World*, ed. Malcolm Bull (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 137–58 (139). Shaffer suggests, “The state of affairs eloquently described by Christopher Hill as obtaining in the English Revolution—‘It is difficult to exaggerate the extent and strength of millenarian expectations among ordinary people in the 1640s and early 50s’—had been much altered. England by the middle of the next century was no longer that ‘nation of Prophets’” (137). Shaffer’s skepticism for easy historical parallels is welcome, but her argument that revolutions in the stratosphere of Biblical textual theory transformed the religious sensibilities of “ordinary people” is problematic. Most Anglican clergy were ignorant of the Higher Criticism until much later in the nineteenth century, and many “ordinary people” during the Romantic period still had deep affection for magical and prophetic practices and explanations.

Will ye not listen for a few moments to one who speaketh in the name of the Lord? I stand here to warn you of the righteous judgment of God, which is coming on you, and which is now near at hand. . . . Ye have in the midst of you a scourge of pestilence, which has crossed the world to reach ye. Ye brought a bill into the House to retard its approaches, and ye refused in that bill to insert a recognition of your God . . . I told Ministers it was not God they worshipped. The people is the god before whom they bow down in absurd and degraded worship. . . . This mockery of religion God will not away with, he will bring on fasting and humiliation, woe and sorrow, weeping and lamentation, flame and confusion. . . . I tell ye that this land will soon be desolate, a little time and ye shall howl one and all in your streets.²⁹

Perceval inspired catcalls rather than pious attention in his peers. But only by mapping this awkward position for prophecy in the early nineteenth century—suspended between fundamentalist conviction, secularized contempt, academic attention, and noncommittal gawking—can we fully situate its most canonical instances. Even as certain types of Romantic-era prophecy were invested with tremendous prestige, others were stigmatized as cultural detritus or certifiable insanity, and the distinctions were easily compromised. The result could be an anxious, apologetic discourse, pervaded with a deep discomfort at its own existence, as Percy Shelley hedged that though “Poets . . . were called in earlier epochs of the world legislators or prophets,” it should not be understood “that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word.”³⁰

Prophecy could unite privileged arrogance with dropsical ridiculousness, and as Southcott would remind polite writers (and as they would gleefully remind their competitors), hierophantically masculine potency could easily be identified with an overweight, lunatic old woman. Southcott simultaneously fascinated and repulsed the nation. Yet her fame from 1813 to 1815 was also her undoing, and through the object that attracted the most attention: her body. It’s just this body with which recent criticism engages, when it engages with Southcott at all. For Debbie Lee, Southcott’s “brilliance” is “a language composed from a grammar of emotions and whose deep structure was the body itself.”³¹ Susan Juster leverages

29. See Boyd Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, 214–15, for an account of this harangue and reactions to it.

30. *Shelley’s Prose: or The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. David Lee Clark (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1988), 279.

31. Lee, *Romantic Liars*, 22.

Southcott as a “place to begin an examination into the shifting place of the body in the history of female mysticism.”³² Helen Thomas draws attention to the ways “Southcott’s revisionary female theology implicitly challenged the established religious and patriarchal traditions of late eighteenth-century England and redetermined the female body as an important textual medium.”³³ The prophetess created the taste by which she has been judged, playing her most ambitious metaphysical stakes on the outcome of her pregnancy: “if the visitation of the Lord does not produce a son this year, then Jesus Christ was NOT the son of God, born in the manner spoken by the Virgin Mary; but if I have a son this year, then, in like manner, our Saviour was born.”³⁴

Southcott wasn’t alone in viewing her pregnancy as a referendum on Christianity rather than on her. The *Political Register* seized the prospect of Shiloh to satirize the equally absurd consensus He scandalized. All Christian doctrine, Cobbett reminded, was founded on a confusion of physical and spiritual: “the great Author of Nature, in order to redeem his creatures from a portion of the disgrace entailed upon them, in consequence of their first parents eating some fruit from a forbidden tree, he begot, in a supernatural manner, a son upon the body of a young woman, who was betrothed to an old man.”³⁵ But while wryly blasphemous, Cobbett’s coverage was in fact almost uniquely temperate. Most of Southcott’s contemporaries represented her body as her most outrageous conception. P. Mathias, one of the small army of doctors who regaled an eager nation with accounts of the changes in her breasts, belly, and diet, thought her pregnancy “so disgusting a subject,” an idea “so revolting to common sense,” that he was compelled to “enter my protest against opinions so blasphemous and profane.”³⁶

Southcott’s pregnancy was less “hysterical” than the response of a besieged medical and literary establishment. The stakes were high, with Reason and Enlightenment in the balance. One biographer lamented that “a period when men are illuminated by philosophy, founded on experience . . . a period for useful knowledge should be perplexed by the wild

32. Susan Juster, “Mystical Pregnancy and Holy Bleeding: Visionary Experience in Early Modern Britain and America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 57.2 (April 2000): 249–88 (250).

33. Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives*, 53.

34. Southcott quoted in *Cobbett’s Political Register*, September 10, 1814, 330.

35. “On Religious Persecution,” *Cobbett’s Political Register*, February 25, 1815, 251.

36. P. Mathias, *The Case of Joanna Southcott, As Far As It Came Under His Professional Observation, Impartially Stated* (London: Printed for the Author, 1815), 4–6.

vagaries of fanciful illusion.”³⁷ But this cultural panic over Southcott’s “revolting,” “disgusting,” and “blasphemous” pregnancy was also a safety valve, which released or displaced the actual tensions she conjured. It wasn’t her body, but her *books* that had initially scandalized polite self-representation. As early as 1809, the *Belfast Monthly Magazine* whined that her prophecies, and the inexplicable demand they created, were “occurrences to shake my confidence . . . in the doctrine of the progressive improvement of mankind.”³⁸

Southcott as author, as poet, as marketing sensation: these were the roles in which she disrupted the norms of Romantic culture. The drama of late 1814 let a breathless nation recast Southcott as a bodily, rather than a cultural producer, a sexual rather than textual phenomenon. Britain knew how to accommodate—which is to say, discipline, pathologize, and disappear—the bodies of disorderly women, particularly by representing their disorders as bodily. The spectacular coverage of Southcott’s bizarre “pregnancy” had a paradoxically normativizing force. Even as the coverage became more horrified, Southcott and the country could be returned to models of hysterical monstrosity and female sexuality that comforted in their dismissive familiarity, and allowed *La Belle Assemblée* to remark that “the whole piece is nothing but the production of a silly mad woman, attested by people as silly.”³⁹

That Southcott’s pregnancy was, in fact, *not*—it was her death, rather than the Second Coming growing inside her—only reinforced its corrective function, retrospectively indicting all of her earlier prophecies as similarly fraudulent. After months of intense buildup, even a natural child would have had nearly supernatural consequences, as the *Political Register* suggested:

[I]t is not of the miraculous conception, of the divine incarnation, which people in general doubt, or which prevents the many from declaring themselves. It is the fact of the pregnancy only which they seem to question . . . if Joanna’s pregnancy does not fail, it will be somewhat difficult to prevent the increase of her followers . . . it is not impossible, [that it may] prove a formidable rival, to perhaps totally supercede, all other systems of religion.⁴⁰

37. Hughson, *Life of Joanna Southcott*, 3.

38. *Belfast Monthly Magazine*, “On Credulity,” 20.

39. *La Belle Assemblée*, September 1814, 102.

40. *Cobbett’s Political Register*, September 10, 1814, 332; 327.

But fail her pregnancy did, along with her cultural capital: a narrative quickly coalesced around the prophet's irrelevant anachronism, of an alienation from modernity so profound it proved fatal. A few months after her death, Southcott could be imagined as having been always already posthumous, a weirdly belated fossil of medieval superstition cast up on the hostile shore of Reason. The consensus of History, reviewed by the American *Eclectic Magazine* in 1851, was that her "errors and actions . . . although taking place in the nineteenth century . . . equal in absurdity any that we read of as enacted in what we term 'the dark ages.'"⁴¹ As soon study Margery Kempe as Southcott in order to understand the Regency; both women equally unnecessary to the age's self-representations, and its subsequent histories. Her prophetic books, proving no more fertile than her body, quickly died out of commercial and critical significance.

Posthumous Prophecy

Quickly, but propelled by an anxious urgency. As a practicing and vital prophet, Southcott had exposed a nerve of raw contradiction within orthodox Protestantism. By the late eighteenth century, normative theology in Britain, Anglican and Dissenting, was required to endorse Biblical prophecy, but only in the historical, geographical, and theological removes of the Holy Land. Southcott threatened to shred the thin polite fiction draping the Church of England, as it maintained the self-evident absurdity of contemporary prophecy, while drawing its doctrine from those testamental revelations that distinguished the perpetually holy from the singularly historical, and which kept ancient Judea relevant to modern Europeans. As *Wonderful Prophecies* argued in 1795, "to doubt of the truth and reality of the antient Prophecies, would be to sap the very foundation of religion, and to reject the universally concurring testimony of antient history."⁴² The glue that bound faith to its evidences was not for universal application. Southey, for one, was wary of the wild transpositions of enthusiasts such as Brothers, Southcott, and Blake, since "[t]here are not so many points of similitude between Bristol and Jerusalem, as between Monmouth and Macedon."⁴³ But even otherwise staid churchmen were often heavily invested in some version of prophecy. This was,

41. "Curiosities of Eccentric Biography," *Eclectic Magazine* 22.3 (New York: March 1851): 409.

42. Brothers, *Wonderful Prophecies*, 6.

43. Southey, *Life of Wesley*, 1:216.

as Clarke Garrett suggests, a *Respectable Folly*: “millenarianism enjoyed a continued acceptability within educated circles through its association with a long line of distinguished scholars, including Joseph Mede, Henry More, Isaac Newton, and Joseph Priestley.”⁴⁴ William Warburton, Richard Hurd, and Robert Lowth all made careers out of visionary study, climaxing in Warburton’s endowment of lectures promoting prophecy as the bulwark for rational Christianity, devoted by its deed of trust to “prov[ing] the truth of Revealed Religion in general and of the Christian in particular, from the completion of the Prophecies in the Old and new Testament, which relate to the Christian church, especially to the apostacy of Papal Rome.”⁴⁵

But Warburton’s safety latch was “the *completion* of the Prophecies” in the Testaments. To be socially acceptable, “Prophecies” could make no claim on later history. This was the thesis of Henry Kett’s *History the Interpreter of Prophecy, or A View of Scriptural Prophecies and their Accomplishment*, a text that itself demonstrated the impressive network of cultural capital underneath the professional study of prophecy. The work had some popular success, going through two editions in 1799, but its publication by a university press guaranteed its impeccable theology, and Kett (a fellow of Trinity College, Oxford) dedicated *History the Interpreter* to the Bishop of Lincoln, “whose conduct as a man, and whose vigilance as a prelate, demand the grateful acknowledgements of every friend to the Established Church of England; especially at a period when such examples are eminently useful to the cause of Christianity.”⁴⁶ But as a vehicle of exchange between well-connected clerics, *History the Interpreter* was expected to make the right noises about the historical termination of visionary power. Kett insisted that “since the Revelation by St. John closed the New Testament, 1700 years have elapsed without the appearance of any Prophet in the world . . . the great object of Prophecy being a description of the Messiah, and of his kingdom, the prophetic min-

44. Clarke Garrett, *Respectable Folly: Millenarians and the French Revolution in France and England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 15. W. H. Oliver has similarly contended that “prophetic theology was . . . a normal exegetical activity, a concern of professional scholars, and a respectable way of saying things about God, man, and their relationship in society and history.” *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 13.

45. See Balfour, *Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, 82–105.

46. Henry Kett, *History the Interpreter of Prophecy, or A View of Scriptural Prophecies and their Accomplishment*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1799), 1: “Dedication.”

istry ceased when that object had been sufficiently displayed.”⁴⁷ Contemporary men might interpret the prophetic Scriptures—though Kett shifted even this agency onto an inevitable and impersonal “History,” which forecast only the “Accomplishment” of its subject—but they could never be prophets.

The Church of England would hear formidably erudite treatments of prophecy, but its historicizing projects never lost sight of their social function: the stigmatization of heretically prophetic practice by attending to sacred prophetic texts. The Warburton Lectures faced both ways, recovering the past in order to ignore the present. Genuine prophecy and its genuine “Cessation” were both equally precious blessings. As John Davison’s Warburton Lectures (published by John Murray, read by both Coleridge and Southey) argued, prophecy had imitated the Messiah it foretold, sacrificing its historical life for the sake of the Christian cause:

Prophecy had been the oracle of Judaism, and of Christianity, to uphold the authority of the one, and reveal the promise of the other. And now its latest admonitions, were like those of a faithful departing minister, embracing and summing up his duties. Resigning its charge to the personal *Precursor of Christ*, it expired, with the Gospel upon its tongue.⁴⁸

This was good theology, though not everyone warmed to its melodrama. While Southey thought Davison would be “remembered as one of those men who supported by their ability and their learning the reputation which the Ch. of England has hitherto held above all other Protestant Churches,”⁴⁹ Coleridge marginalized “whether from any modern work of a tenth part of the merit of these Discourses, either in matter or in force and felicity of diction and composition, as many uncouth and awkward sentences could be extracted.”⁵⁰

The Church of England was emphatic that “prophecy,” though the pillar of Christian prehistory, had not only ceased, it had ceased to be necessary. Everything that should have been revealed, had been revealed. As one of the speakers in the 1795 dialogue *The Age of Prophecy!* asserted: “for, by the sacrifice of the Messiah, the end of all prophecy was fulfilled; atonement was made.”⁵¹ Moreover, if prophecy had now been put

47. Kett, *History the Interpreter*, 1:24–26.

48. John Davison, *Discourses on Prophecy*, 456–57.

49. *New Letters of Robert Southey*, 2:411.

50. Coleridge, *Marginalia*, 2:154–55.

51. Anon., *The Age of Prophecy! Or, Further Testimony of the Mission of Richard*

to rest, it had always led a somewhat posthumous existence, and respectable accounts operated from within an unexpectedly inverted horizon of time. Rather than allowing the mystically palpable model promoted by *Wonderful Prophecies*, where “the direct and immediate influence of the unerring spirit upon the human mind . . . by a forcible impulse, turns its view towards futurity, and imparts to it an intuitive knowledge of succeeding events,” scholars insisted on the archeological and retrospective force of prophecy.⁵² Prophecy rightly considered, Kett argued, had never been important because of whatever paltry predictive function it had possessed: it was instead valuable as a *reminder* of the Providential organization of the universe, revealed through the rear-facing judgments of history. As humans grew ever more removed from Eden, the Fall, and the promises of Salvation, prophecy prevented this temporal gap from widening into a moral one, and recovered the lessons of the past by telling the future: “The Prophets, who followed Moses in continual succession for above a thousand years, were employed in preserving the remembrance of the gracious promises of future Redemption to fallen man, and the knowledge of a future state of retribution—in keeping up a sense of the constant superintending providence of God upon all the world.”⁵³

“Futurity” was ontologically subordinate to History, and prophecy had not so much revealed the details of the future, but that the future had always already been written. Only this initial divine inscription of an eternal organic form, rather than its later echoes, was worthy of admiration (and egregious capitalization): “THE HARMONY OF PROPHECY—THE ONE GREAT SCHEME THAT PERVADES ALL ITS PARTS—AND THE CONCURRENCE OF ALL HUMAN EVENTS TO ACCOMPLISH ITS STUPENDOUS PLAN.”⁵⁴ Prophecy shaped narrative comfort—beginnings, middles, and ends of Aristotelian purity—out of anarchic and arbitrary time. Thus Davison contended that individual predictions were useless, only reaching moral and metaphysical meaning in their “system”:

This, to the serious religionist, is a doctrine of the greatest moment to his rational satisfaction. It gives to him the assurance of knowing that the system, in which his place and being are cast, is in the hands of God, not only as foreknowing that which it is to be, but as administering the plan and executing the ends of his Providential Government, (wise and right that

Brothers. By a Convert (London, 1795), 16.

52. Brothers, *Wonderful Prophecies*, 9.

53. Kett, *History the Interpreter*, 1:23–24.

54. Kett, *History the Interpreter*, 1:iii.

government must be) in the midst of all the tumult of the seeming disorders, the vicissitudes, and wayward course of the world.⁵⁵

In this self-styled “rational” treatment, the true utility of prophecy was as a readily grasped thread—provocatively leading, but tattered and thin in isolation—that tugged into revelation the vast skein of God’s providence, a sublimely permanent “Government” of markedly increased appeal as the supposedly perpetual kingdoms of earth crashed in Revolution.

The balance of antitheses in this construction of prophecy—the basis of Christianity, yet also superfluous to it; projecting into the future only to read the evidences of the past; black magic in some instances, a valid object of study for the eminently respectable in others—had always been delicate, under long pressure from freethinking Dissent. It finally tipped under the weight of Southcott, and her immediate predecessor Richard Brothers. In the mid-1790s, Brothers, a half-pay lieutenant in the Royal Navy, anointed himself Prince of the Hebrews (and so demanded the British crown, among other spoils), foretelling the death of George III and the total annihilation of London if his requests were not met. Government was alarmed enough to have him arrested for something like treason, but not before Nathaniel Halhed, a scholar of Oriental languages and religions, rose to his defense in the House of Commons, forcing a Parliamentary debate on Brothers’s *Revealed Knowledge*.⁵⁶ Halhed’s conversion stunned his colleagues into a baffled if politic silence, as no one seconded his motion to reconsider the imprisonment of the prophet. But in fact, Brothers represented an amalgamation of the orthodox and enthusiastic, with enough conventionality to appeal to a gentleman, and a certain restraint that offended Southcott (who also resented the competition). Though Brothers’s *Revealed Knowledge* would become ferociously specific about impending calamities in its *Book the Second*, he had risen to fame with a visionary temporality not entirely alien to the politely retrospective version of prophecy endorsed by men like Kett and Davison.⁵⁷

Book the First advertised itself as dead-on-arrival, since before any of its prophecies had been published, God had already declared to Broth-

55. Davison, *Discourses*, 78–79.

56. For the political and rhetorical entanglements within which Brothers found himself, see John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793–1796* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 504–50; and Juster, *Doomsayers*, 151–62.

57. Richard Brothers, *A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times. Book the Second* (London: 1794 [revised and expanded throughout 1794 and 1795]).

ers, “ALL, ALL. I pardon London and all the people in it, for your sake: there is no other man on earth that could stand before me to ask for so great a thing.”⁵⁸ The presumption of this divine tête-à-tête resulted in an awkward circumspection. Brothers found himself pronouncing not *Apocalypse Now*, but *Might Have Been Had Not*, with a wistfully subjunctive admission that while Doom had been rescheduled, it would have been very impressive indeed:

Had London been destroyed in the year 1791, the place where it stands would have formed a great Bay, or Inlet of the channel: all the Land between Windsor and the Downs would have been sunk, including a distance of eighteen miles each side, but considerably more towards the sea coast; it would be sunk to a depth of seventy fathoms, or four hundred and twenty feet, that no traces of the city might be ever found, or even so much as looked for.⁵⁹

This was a pornography of disaster as compelling as any summer blockbuster, and just as self-consciously fictional: Brothers salvaged his apocalyptic special effects from a prophetic project now languishing in cancellation. Especially in its early versions, the *Revealed Knowledge* allowed itself to be experienced almost as entertainment, producing thrilling scenes of destruction safely neutered as alternative and already circumvented histories.

In this, Brothers was one of the most successful examples of a much larger transformation in prophetic culture. If the Romantic period saw fewer converts to prophetic cults than the 1640s, it had many more idle consumers of prophetic books. Susan Juster argues that while the stakes for prophecy were lower at the end of the eighteenth century—few people were expected to sell their goods and reorient their lives around a charismatic personality—the broadly diffuse influence of prophets may never have been higher, as men and women now casually glanced through pamphlets, or read skeptical and credulous accounts in the press.⁶⁰ The serious prophets of the Romantic period were more numerous than its poet-seers.

58. Brothers, *A Revealed Knowledge, Book the First*, 44.

59. Brothers, *A Revealed Knowledge, Book the First*, 44–45.

60. Juster’s quantification of the scale of this transformation is dramatic: “For every person who joined a millennial sect or heard an inspired prophet in the 1640s and 1650s, hundreds of men and women read a millennial tract, followed the careers of itinerant prophets in the daily newspapers, or attended large open-air assemblies where obscure men and women warned of the dangers to come in the 1780s or 1790s.” *Doomsayers*, 7.

Though Brothers and Southcott astonished the nation, they were just the leading edge of an enthusiastic subculture that seemed on the verge of losing its subordinate status: we know of nearly two hundred other British prophets publishing between 1750 and 1820.⁶¹ The French Wars saw the most developed, most insistent market for new prophecy in the modern world, eclipsing even the Civil Wars, and according to an influential pamphlet in 1795, this demand marked an epochal shift: “as the world has seen an age of Reason and an age of Infidelity, so also shall the world see an age of Prophecy.”⁶²

Like the earlier tumults of the seventeenth century, the Revolutionary crisis seemed to call for visionary accounting. Many people didn't understand the French Revolution, and the ensuing mass mobilization, global war, crop failures, and currency panics in Britain, as political events at all. The available social and economic theories hardly accounted for upheavals so catastrophic they seemed Biblical in scope. Even sober thinkers like Kett granted that prophecy was the only technology up to the task: “it may be presumed, that a summary view of the Prophecies is particularly SUITED TO STRIKE THE MINDS OF THE PRESENT GENERATION, WHO SEEK IN VAIN FOR ANY OTHER ADEQUATE EXPLANATION OF OCCURRENCES SO DEEPLY INTERESTING TO THEMSELVES.”⁶³ The more inexplicable an event seemed, the more attractive any explanation of its divine overdetermination became, and revealed Scripture promised a reliable script for navigating the bewildering. New (yet very old) protocols for prediction and risk-management were called for, Richard Brothers declaimed—now was the time to dispense with the nascent actuarial sciences, and deploy the prophets:

If this war was like any which has preceded it, a prince might, as usual, sit down at his leisure, and calculate, from his successes, how long to carry it on; or, by his defeats, how soon he must leave it off; but the death of Louis XVI. and the revolution in France, having proceeded from the recorded judgment of God, the two *things which have occasioned it, and which have rendered it so entirely different, that its consequences are already determined.*⁶⁴

61. Juster, *Doomsayers*, 64.

62. Anon., *Age of Prophecy!*, 7.

63. Kett, *History the Interpreter*, 1:iii.

64. Brothers, *Revealed Knowledge, Book the Second*, 28.

Prophetic culture, James Hopkins argues, was enormously appealing in its clear answers to complicated problems, offering people who “had virtually no understanding or even awareness of the precipitating factors of the events in France” the brusquely confident response, “It was brought about by God.”⁶⁵ A mystical reading of the French Revolution was not incompatible with a political one, and informants for the Duke of Portland alleged that Paine’s *Rights of Man* was being distributed with Brothers’s *Revealed Knowledge* in Hastings.⁶⁶ But popular prophecy wasn’t necessarily populist politics. Southcott was generally loyalist, her grievances with individual clergymen rather than the institutional Establishment. Even hostile accounts granted that she imagined her followers as a Home Guard, so that “when Napoleon was to effect a landing,” he would “be put to death by the *sealed people!*”⁶⁷ Even so, as Tim Fulford observes, “Millenarianism was not an addition to radical politics but one of the principal discourses in which that politics was formulated.”⁶⁸

In the face of the dramatic rise of contemporary—and so blasphemous, if not Jacobinical—prophecy, it became ever more implausible for an Oxbridge don to meditate on spiritual visions with a straight face. William Pitt’s agents planted prophecies in various “newspapers and pamphlets that cast the French Republic in the role of the Beast of Revelation,”⁶⁹ but after Waterloo, formal clerical treatments of the “prophetic” became ever more doctrinally detached from their subject. In part, this was due to the increasing importance of new methods of textual scholarship derived from models both domestic and foreign. Robert Lowth’s *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1753) prefigured the Higher Criticism, decoding the Scriptures as performances of various personae rather than emanations of the unitary Divine Voice inspiring them,⁷⁰ while Herbert Marsh’s translation of Johann David Michaelis’s *Introduction to the New Testament* (1793–1801) encouraged theologians to uncouple the assured “genuineness” of the New Testament from its more problematic “inspiration.”⁷¹

65. Hopkins, *A Woman*, xvii.

66. Hopkins, *A Woman*, 177. Burke, of course, thought that as Richard Price preached sedition, he “naturally . . . chaunts his prophetic song” (*Reflections*, 94).

67. *La Belle Assemblée*, October 1814, 152.

68. Tim Fulford, “Millenarianism and the Study of Romanticism,” in Fulford, *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, 1–22 (3).

69. Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, 167.

70. Robert Lowth, *De sacra poesi Hebræorum* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1753).

71. John [Johann] David Michaelis, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. Herbert Marsh, 4 vols. (Cambridge: J. Archdeacon [Printer to the University], 1793–1801). See especially 1:70–97 for this argument.

By the 1820s, sober thinkers were eager to downplay the mystical force even of canonical prophecy. Henry Hart Milman's *The History of the Jews* (1829) coyly demurred whether any of the Testamental prophets in fact had been inspired,⁷² while Davison's Warburton Lectures naturalized prophecy as merely a metaphorically exuberant mode of unexceptional theology: "Let the predictions of Prophecy then, for a time, be put out of our thoughts; and let the prophetic books be read for the pure theology which they contain."⁷³ But these shifts in emphasis are explained only incompletely by an intellectual history that notes the rising influence of the German school, or new strategies meant to secure the Church of England's flank against Unitarians or scientific materialism. Tim Fulford reads the collapse of popular prophetic culture in the 1820s and 30s as a general exhaustion at the failure of Brothers and Southcott, but I think the remarkable celebrity—independent from veracity—of both prophets from 1794 to 1815 shifted the terms of polite millennialism as surely as any continental theory or skeptical polemic.⁷⁴

The years 1780 to 1820 witnessed prophecy's dramatic, and ultimately irreversible, slide down the ladder of demographic respectability, from the Warburton Lectures to "the people," "condemned by the opulent classes as fanatics and imposters, and by historians as cranks and the lunatic fringe."⁷⁵ The passage of time falsified Brothers, Southcott, and every lesser prophet. But the vast market demand they aroused was very real, capable of re-determining for its own interests even the most reticent scholarship that took seriously the possibility of prophecy, no matter how historically remote. In the course of debunking Brothers and others, the orthodox *Memoirs of Pretended Prophets* (1795) was most aggravated not by madmen—like the poor, its "Clergyman" author sighed, you will always have these with you—but by an amoral marketplace, which adopted and amplified madness to an unprecedented degree, jettisoning all values other than profit. Editors were now scavenging solid Warburtoni-

72. On Milman, see Jeffrey W. Barbeau, *Coleridge, the Bible, and Religion*, 33–35.

73. Davison, *Discourses*, 54. For an account of Anglican efforts in the middle of the nineteenth century to salvage holy "inspiration" from an increasingly implausible "revelation," see J. Robert Barth, S.J., *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine*, 53–84.

74. On the collapse of millenarianism, Fulford writes, "too many prophets had prophesied, too many days of predicted destruction gone without incident. . . . If the French Revolution had once seemed a millennial 'new dawn' and an apocalyptic 'blood-dimmed tide,' it had by now become a familiar, compromised affair." "Millenarianism and the Study of Romanticism," 10.

75. J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780–1850* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1979), 5.

ans, along with long-dead prophets from the Civil Wars, for any morsel of prophetic enthusiasm to offer the ravenous disciples of Brothers, and the increased sales mortified rather than gratified:

We have lately heard much respecting Prophets and prophecies. The reveries of those enthusiastic men, who have formerly disgraced themselves by their pretensions to a prophetic spirit, have been industriously sought for. Even the writings of sober commentators upon the scripture prophecies, have been ransacked, and their modest conjectures have been styled predictions. Many motley collections of extracts, said to contain remarkable predictions, have issued from the press, and have found numerous readers.⁷⁶

This bubble of prophetic speculation precipitated a panic over the determination of moral and social meaning in genuine scholarship: armatures of citation and classical languages might be recklessly discarded by “motley” anthologies, and “modest conjectures” might be unscrupulously excerpted until they would satisfy an antinomian. Fear at this sort of degradation is essential for understanding the deeply equivocal usage of prophecy that emerged even at the margins of Romantic culture; as Morton Paley suggests, Blake’s enthusiasm for “prophetic books” in the 1790s may have waxed with the first flush of Brothers’s success, and waned sharply following his arrest, which seemed to herald further crackdowns on outspoken enthusiasts.⁷⁷

Nor was Blake isolated in his caution at being misunderstood, or in his case, perhaps being understood too well. Formally studying Biblical prophecy was one thing (and increasingly bad enough), but pretending to be an actual seer was quite another. Only by registering this historical situation for *The Prelude*—in which the two most famous contemporary prophets were an illiterate peasant woman, and a man lucky to be merely incarcerated after being accused of a capital crime against the state—can we recognize the awkwardly abashed way in which it claims the prophetic mantle for Wordsworth, with a humility that may also be a humiliation:

Dearest friend,
Forgive me if I say that I, who long
Had harboured reverentially a thought

76. Anon., *Memoirs of Pretended Prophets. By a Clergyman*, i.

77. Paley, “William Blake, The Prince of the Hebrews, and The Woman Clothed with the Sun,” 267.

That poets, even as prophets, each with each
 Connected in a mighty scheme of truth,
 Have each for his peculiar dower a sense
 By which he is enabled to perceive
 Something unseen before—forgive me, friend,
 If I, the meanest of this band, had hope
 That unto me had also been vouchsafed
 An influx, that in some sort I possessed
 A privilege, and that work of mine,
 Proceeding from the depth of untaught things,
 Enduring and creative, might become
 A power like one of Nature's. (1805 *Prelude* 12:298–312)

There's certainly an elevated strain as Wordsworth ascends “reverentially” to the “privilege” of his “peculiar dower,” though he would soften the enthusiasm of his “influx” into the simpler safety of an “insight” by 1850. But the polite diffidence before august company—“meanest of this band”—has a syntactical tic, and the entire passage is framed by a recurring entreaty to “Forgive me . . . forgive me.” This is as much apology as assertion, one that eagerly reminds Coleridge (“dearest friend . . . friend”) of his responsibility to provide a sympathetic reading. The poem ultimately recoils from fully naming Wordsworth—or, critically, any poet—a prophet, instead generating a simile that's also a hedge. Though David Riede reads this passage as “the communion of poets and prophets in a transcendent scheme,” there's an equivocation within Wordsworth's equivalence.⁷⁸ Poets are “even as” prophets, which highlights rhetorical and even functional similarity while maintaining an essential distinction between the two. This is, the syntax insists, a tropical comparison and not an identification, while “each with each” links as it separates, binding poets to poets, and prophets to prophets, without endangering the clean purity of the categories. This is partly trepidation before Miltonic majesty, but it's also reticence to descend into the miasma of prophetic enthusiasm that was Wordsworth's far more immediate contemporary.

This is a familiar story for Romantic prophecy, which was characterized by an affect of mourning over its own death, anxiously declaring itself bereft of all contemporaries, while preaching a doctrine of “Cessation” that might satisfy any good churchman. Self-consciously polite writers coupled their investment in visionary apocalypse with its emphatic inter-

78. Riede, *Oracles and Hierophants*, 106.

ment, constructing a poetics of nostalgia that set the present decay of prophetic power against its historical—and *only* historical—force. Wordsworth’s famous sigh “Milton! Thou should’st be living at this hour” may summon the figural power of what David Riede calls “the last prophetic voice in the English tradition,” but it also insists on the *lastness* of that voice.⁷⁹ If Milton incarnates visionary energy he also ends it, and socially problematic enthusiasms are decently buried in the dust of the seventeenth century. Wordsworth’s “prophecy” has no modern life, no material claims on contemporary England—its rhetorical vitality has survived only by embalment. The lament of the sonnet “London, 1802” not only affiliates Wordsworth with the prestige of a Miltonic lineage, it’s also making a very precise argument for spatio-temporal anachronism, inscribed by its title: *London, 1802*. Opposed to “London, 1649,” this city, in this year, is a “stagnant fen” of spiritual energies that have “ceased to be,” in which prophetic possibilities are hopelessly out of both place and time. If this is glum self-critique, it’s also careful self-preservation, reluctantly relinquishing exalted models in order to inoculate against more embarrassing enthusiasms.

Autopsy and the Death of Romantic Prophecy

But London, 1802, also saw Southcott’s first runaway success, *The Strange Effects of Faith*, suggesting Wordsworth had greatly exaggerated the reports of prophecy’s death. The somber consensus of Southcott’s “anachronism” and “alienation” from modernity was of course a motivated formation: she was the most powerful member of a community that reminded Romantic culture that vision, inspiration, and prophecy were hardly dead metaphors. They were increasingly *rude* metaphors, produced and consumed by the marginal and disenfranchised, and the polite pretense of the historical distance of prophecy was meant to salvage these rhetorics from social contamination.

Yet Southcott was especially important, I think, not because she was the ancient shockingly reborn in the present, but because she was so unnervingly modern—not just in the sense that she incarnated prophecy’s heyday, but because she, more than any of her competitors, was a creature of the literary marketplace. She sharply deviated from traditional form of female mysticism, which was usually physical and private: the stigmata

79. Riede, *Oracles and Hierophants*, 9.

or bodily raptures, occurring in a bedroom or other cloistered space.⁸⁰ As Southey complained, if Southcott had had the decency to follow the precedents of charismatic piety, everything might have made sense. She galled insofar as she innovated, and the *Letters from England* regretfully set her against a simpler example of similar heresy:

In the early part of the thirteenth century there appeared an English virgin in Italy, beautiful and eloquent, who affirmed that the Holy Ghost was incarnate in her for the redemption of women, and she baptized women in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of herself. Her body was carried to Milan and burnt there. An arch-heretic of the same sex and country is now establishing a sect in England, founded upon a not dissimilar and equally portentous blasphemy. The name of the woman is Joanna Southcott; she neither boasts of the charms of her forerunner, nor needs them. Instead of having an eye which can fascinate, and a tongue which can persuade to error by glossing it with sweet discourse, she is old, vulgar, and illiterate. In all the innumerable volumes which she has sent into the world, there are not connected sentences in sequence, and the language alike violates common sense, and common syntax.⁸¹

Though this first “English virgin” was spectrally immaterial, having “appeared” in Italy as a deracinated apparition, she was also richly embodied, and Southey compromised her sacrilegious outrage through her corporeality. The virgin’s body ultimately marked her as vulnerable and unthreatening, and the chilly casualness that froze her ending—“Her body was carried to Milan and burnt there”—coded discipline as pure inevitability. She posed an entirely unproblematic disobedience, one that was brought under a corrective regime without the sentence’s rhetorical, let alone ideological, structures straining in the slightest: she did not contest orthodoxy, but revealed its serene dominance.

Not so Southcott, who broke radically with this earlier model, producing an eruption without a clear regulatory mechanism. As Southey ventriloquized through his Spanish Don, “this phrensy would have been speedily cured in our country; bread and water, a solitary cell, and a little wholesome discipline are specifics in such cases.”⁸² Here was a cult of personality not susceptible to the bodily controls of “bread and water.” Southcott

80. See Juster, *Doomsayers*, 96–133, for an account of the enduring importance—from the medieval to the Methodistical—of the flesh in mystical experiences.

81. Southey, *Letters from England*, 433.

82. Southey, *Letters from England*, 441.

had substituted “innumerable volumes” for the captivating charms of “the eye” or the fleshly “tongue,” and she “fascinates” not through an eroticized intimacy, but through the economic circulations of the bookseller’s shop—her enthusiasms didn’t come conveniently cloistered, but were rather packaged, priced, and “sent into the world.” Southcott arrested attention with texts, not sex, and her language threatened Southey with a monstrous inversion of the sublime, passing all understanding as it blurred terror and the terrible. At once disgusted and overmatched, he confessed himself unable “to convey any adequate idea of this unparalleled and unimaginable nonsense.”⁸³ Nearly all of Southcott’s critics harped over the ineffable nastiness of her words, and Southey’s sneer that “the language of Joanna . . . is groveling in the very mud and mire of baseness and vulgarity” was a universal polite opinion.⁸⁴ But such assaults could also be surprised by the compulsive attractions of language so catastrophically bad. If her books were disastrous, they also had the morbid appeal of a semantic car crash, from which it was impossible to look away. Her appalling vulgarity could generate solecisms so bizarre they were nearly poetic, bringing one essayist to marvel at her ability to marry “*man*,” “*done*,” and “*go on*” in rhyme, which “would indeed lead us to suppose it was some west country deity who had inspired this apostle.”⁸⁵

Southcott was managing to transform rhetorical imbecility into a perverse kind of strength, and no one was quite sure how to correct a set of texts that seemed to generate value out of error. As one of her followers, Elias Carpenter, argued in his *Nocturnal Alarm*, Southcott mattered more the less she meant. The further her texts drifted from any appreciable significance, the more transcendently important they became:

She pretends to no knowledge, frequently declaring herself unable to explain what she writes: and, in fact, she often gives proof that she understands not its purport so well as those to whom it is read. Had it been otherwise, we should have had none of those strong evidences of the reality of her work. Her being unable to explain what she writes, and to write so as others can read, are two circumstances which afford me the highest satisfaction.⁸⁶

83. Southey, *Letters from England*, 437.

84. Southey, *Letters from England*, 445.

85. *La Belle Assemblée*, September 1814, 103.

86. Elias Carpenter, *Nocturnal Alarm; Being an Essay on Prophecy and Vision* (London: W. Smith, 1803), 68–69.

Southcottians might draw theopneustic “satisfaction” from “her being unable to explain what she writes,” but even among the unconverted, the drumbeat of jokes against her incomprehensible “baseness and vulgarity” marked a nervous defense formation. If Southcott violated every grammar, she sold better than many decent authors, and by such a margin that her success called into question the operative force of the very sociolinguistic protocols she transgressed.

Southcott seemed to have an unsettling ability to remake in her image the culture she nominally embarrassed, captivating the establishment meant to restrain her. Southey sat incredulous as the reliable Anglican parsons dispatched to catechize Southcott were *converted by* her, and “listened with reverence, believed all her ravings, and supplied her with means and money to spread them abroad.”⁸⁷ That she was a functionally illiterate peasant woman, somehow capable of producing a marketing campaign that the House of Murray might envy, only compounded the outrage of her celebrity. William Sharp, an intimate of the Godwin circle who was also Southcott’s rapt devotee, engraved a portrait that captured her unique appeal, textually compelling and physically indifferent (see frontispiece).

This is remarkably unlike the portraits of other successful women writers such as Charlotte Smith and Felicia Hemans, who traded on sartorial sophistication and dewy-eyed sex appeal: this is a figure of little personal charisma and an unlikely author, every inch the fusty old serving woman in her Sunday (not very) best. Yet, despite belonging to the below-stairs, Southcott imperiously offers culture; she doesn’t consume it. The outsized book of prophecy—the real site of attention for the engraving—nearly spills from its binding as it demands to be read, and even hostile viewers are conscripted into glancing over her open page. Most of all, this is an entirely one-way relationship of political and literary mastery. Her gaze, confidently addressing her spectator rather than the books in her lap, argues no interest in reading, only in being read. As she herself admitted, “I never read any books, at all; but write by the spirit as I am directed. I

87. Southey, *Letters from England*, 438. Tim Fulford has diagnosed this as a chronic symptom of Southey’s worries over the polite engagement with enthusiasm, suggesting that Southey also thought Halhed had “gone native,” importing an Eastern illness sympathetic to the domestic disorders of Brothers: “Orientalism might infect powerful and educated people with the same kind of irrational belief as that which uneducated people had contracted in ignorant credulity. Fanaticism, Southey feared, was a disease of British India that might leave the educated unfit to govern the uneducated—and the uneducated had already contracted a revolutionary version of it from France.” Fulford, “Pagodas and Pregnant Throes: Orientalism, Millenarianism and Robert Southey,” in Fulford, *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, 121–37 (127).

should not like to read any books to mix my senses with any works but those of the spirit by whom I write.”⁸⁸

Writing sixty-five books in twelve years, Southcott hardly had time to read. She was industrious enough to have become an industry: “dictating books as fast as her scribes can write them down, she publishes them as fast as they are written, and the Joannians buy them as fast as they are published.”⁸⁹ But here the object of critique shifts from Joanna to the “*Joannians*”—not the private pathology of an isolated enthusiast, but a raucous system of market desire, and it’s these Southcottians, even more than Southcott, who irritated. Rather like Byron’s remark that the miracle was not that she was pregnant, but that she could find someone to make her so,⁹⁰ Southcott mattered not because she wrote, but because so many people wanted, and were able, to buy her prophecies. Her “inspiration” wasn’t a rhetorical retreat or a transcendental withdrawal, but a thoroughly socialized system that entranced some, and appalled others. Disciples like Carpenter might celebrate that the prophecies barely had an author-function, belonging entirely “to those to whom it is read,” while Southey warned, “when a madman calls himself inspired, from that moment the disorder becomes infectious.”⁹¹ But both agreed “Southcott” incarnated something public rather than personal.

For a brief moment, polite literary culture discovered itself floating fragily atop a popular current that threatened to swamp its cherished self-representations. While the *Times* was “almost ashamed” at its own coverage “of the above-named wretched old woman,” it justified itself that, “till her prophecies were made public, few of the better-informed people knew to what a degree of beastly ignorance thousands of their fellow creatures had fallen on religious subjects, by the desertion of their parish churches.”⁹² It wasn’t just that Southcott’s vast audience revealed that

88. Southcott quoted in Hopkins, *A Woman*, 10.

89. Southey, *Letters from England*, 442.

90. “I long to know what she will produce—her being with child at 65 is indeed a miracle—but her getting any one to beget it—a greater.” Byron to John Murray, September 2, 1814, in *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 12 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1973–82), 4:164.

91. Carpenter, *Nocturnal Alarm*, 68. Southey, *Letters from England*, 428.

92. *Times*, January 12, 1815, p. 3, col. c. This “beastly ignorance” of “their fellow creatures” was sometimes driven even closer to home. The *Belfast Monthly Magazine* related the bewildered confusion of socialites calling for breakfast in Bath on the morning of Good Friday, 1808, and receiving only silence in return. The servant classes (“dupes to their superstitions and fears”) had decamped *en masse* for the countryside, as a woman pretending to be Southcott had predicted the city would be destroyed for its Austenian sins. “On Credulity,” 22.

“the progress of reason” hadn’t had much effect on most of the country, and that the rural Devon of the nineteenth century could produce “wise women” as well as the thirteenth; an association between intellectual and class privileges—the demographic non-universality of universal reason—was as much feature as bug of “enlightenment.”⁹³ On the contrary, the Southcottians, by flexing their economic muscle, were poised to seize control of the cultural technologies of Reason—print culture and the public sphere—without being co-opted into ideologies of politeness and rationality supposedly inseparable from them. Southcott’s enthusiasms had found national purchase: the Southcottians demonstrated that “vulgar insanity” had a market, and not only of the abject and ephemeral sort catalogued by Iain McCalman’s *Radical Underworld*, but one surprisingly well-to-do, with enough mass to redefine cultural norms.

By the autumn of 1814, Southcott’s commercial success was forcing Britain to examine itself in a way that we no longer do: to consider the prospect of national tastes and traditions characterized not just by *Waverly*, *The Excursion*, and *Childe Harold*, but also by *Prophecies Announcing the Birth of the Prince of Peace*. Southcott seems to have been a mirror in which Regency culture discovered itself, and didn’t much care for what it saw. Mythologies of the laudably sluggish rationalism of the English race were tarnished by a nation consumed with prophecies of post-menopausal pregnancy, and international prestige was on the line. Southey may have fabricated the Spanish contempt for “these English,” whom the narrator of *Letters from England* was “accustomed to consider as an unbelieving people,” only to discover they “are in reality miserably prone to superstition,” but the press of former and current colonies was eager to trumpet England’s absurd fixations.⁹⁴ The *Boston Spectator* laundered Southey’s critique as its own, crowing that the prophetic conclusively proved that “extreme credulity is more prevalent among the lower classes of people in England, than in any other country that has any pretensions to vie with them in civilization.”⁹⁵ The *Belfast Monthly Magazine* took some pleasure in hurling accusations of superstition back at the metropole, chortling, “there is more of this duperly in England than

93. As John Rule has shown, the folk-culture of Devonshire remained magical long into Victoria’s reign, with deeply held beliefs about fairies, “knockers” (underground spirits who helped and hindered miners), witches, and conjurers. Rule suggests that it was precisely this powerful baseline of superstition which accounted for Methodism’s striking success in Devon and Cornwall, as “Methodism did not so much replace folk-beliefs as translate them into a religious idiom.” Rule, “Methodism, Popular Beliefs and Village Culture,” 63.

94. Southey, *Letters from England*, 427.

95. *Boston Spectator*, “Joanna Southcott,” 215.

with us: not, I suppose, from their greater credulity or cullibility [*sic*], but because being a richer nation, they are better able to afford the luxury of being duped.”⁹⁶ Southcott had made “dupery” into a luxury good, and the nation bought heavily. Along the way, she was yet one more lesson that cultural authority and ostensible orthodoxy were fragile things, given to erratic obsessions and pathological fascinations: “there is no time when popular credulity has not some hobby, The Cock-lane Ghost—Richard Brothers and his prophecies, Perkins’ Metallick Tractors—some prodigy or other makes a figure, and seems to engage the attention of a great portion of the nation, either in wondering at the miracle, or in laughing at those who believe it.”⁹⁷ These hobbies might be risible, but Southcott seemed to evidence that they were not so much disruptive of English culture, as constitutive of it. One either believed or laughed, but the agenda was always already scripted by “popular credulity,” and the belated tut-tutting of the self-appointed arbiters of taste was a weak reaction to, rather than a regulation of, the rumblings of enthusiasm.

In the last moments of her life, Southcott hosted anxieties much larger than herself: trepidation at new cultural politics driven by consumers with little interest in what had been hegemonic goods and practices; worries about the absent or insane program of the literary marketplace that she metaphorized, an Eolian machine that mindlessly spewed popular nonsense and stillborn monstrosities, to feed its “herd . . . ready to devour this garbage as the bread of life.”⁹⁸ Southcott’s prophetic certainty ironically figured the unpredictability of Romantic culture, the irresistible conscriptions that could faddishly remake a public sphere increasingly crowded with men and women unmoored from the anchors of serious material or cultural capital. The “Joannians” provoked something like what Lucy Newlyn has called “the anxiety of reception,” an ideological rather than psychological unease at the vulnerability of authorial and national meanings, now in the hands of more and more readers, less and less “qualified to understand what they were reading.”⁹⁹ Southey, one of Southcott’s best if most reluctant students, found her the unexpectedly ideal trope for his own unwanted celebrity, which marked him as the victim of the culture he dominated unwillingly. In the midst of the *Wat Tyler* affair, he confided to William Smith, “I have reigned in the newspapers as paramount as Joanna

96. *Belfast Monthly Magazine*, “On Credulity,” 20.

97. *Boston Spectator*, “Joanna Southcott,” 216.

98. Southey, *Letters from England*, 437.

99. Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism*, 4.

Southcott during the last month of her tympany.”¹⁰⁰ There would be other parallels, though it's hard to say whether they were more or less dignified; in the same letter, Southey suggests that “My celebrity . . . may perhaps have impeded the rising reputation of Toby the sapient pig.”

But if Southcott was the personal vehicle for Southey's bitter humor at the absurd helplessness of the individual before the faceless malignity of publicity, for Cobbett, she had become the universal type for the times. Though “every age” had had its “*visionaries, prophets, and inspired,*” Southcott made a uniquely modern contribution, since all her “former competitors” were plagued by querulous self-doubt, prophesying “in so *ambiguous* a way, that even their most intimate followers found it difficult to ascertain the meaning of the oracle which they delivered.”

But in Joanna there is no want of *courage*. She seems to have been sufficiently aware that she lived in an *enlightened* age, in a country where *learning* abounds, *amongst scholars*, and with a people accustomed to *investigate* and *criticise*. Nothing of *concealment* marked her progress. From the commencement of, what she considers, her divine inspirations, she has *boldly* announced them; she has *challenged* inquiry; she has held *public conferences*; and she boasts of the *fulfillment* of her predictions—not uttered in *secret*, but in the presence of thousands of her enemies, who now rank themselves among her disciples and warmest supporters.¹⁰¹

In Cobbett's italicized community of keywords, parody rubs elbows with seriousness, and Southcott emerges as the unlikely exemplar of—or at least, impossible without—the public sphere of “thousands” of “*scholars*” and “*conferences,*” which “*investigate*” and “*criticise,*” according to the epistemologies of an “*enlightened age.*” These are the agents for Southcott's dissemination, rather than her rebuke, as “enemies” convert to “disciples” under the pressure of her “boldly . . . challenged” invitation to “inquiry.” If there's a disorder here, the nation shares it with its prophetess, as contemporary enthusiasm supplants melancholy and “nerves” as what John Wesley's friend George Cheyne had diagnosed as “The English Malady”: a madness born of cultural sophistication and imperial power, economic triumph and nice refinement, rather than abjection and alien-

100. *Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, 4:375. He got some mileage out of his Southcott joke, writing to Humphrey Senhouse in March 1817, “You see I am flourishing in the newspapers as much as Joanna Southcote did before her expected accouchement” (4:257).

101. *Cobbett's Political Register*, September 10, 1814, 326–27.

ation.¹⁰² The rage for Southcott indicted the decadence of a culture so surfeited with leisure and wealth that both were wasted in lavish fruitlessness, and Joanna became the accidental magnet for time, money, and ink so plentiful they had no more urgent—or productive—use. As the *Analectic Magazine* informed curious Philadelphians in 1815, this was a disorder of the English national spirit, which, while at war with both French ambition and American democracy, chose to devote its resources instead to Southcott's "nursery furniture, baby clothes, and gold candle cups and spoons . . . a superb manger fitted up as a child's crib, made of the most costly materials, with draperies, &c., cost 300£. Many dozens of damask and diaper napkins, seriously wrought, designed for solemn occasions; a costly mohair mantle; a purple robe diverse rich frocks bibs, caps &c . . . a large sum of money was subscribed to build a palace for the expected infant."¹⁰³

It's just as she was beginning to mean something far beyond herself that the fatal collapse of her pregnancy could be made to shrink the heady consequences of Southcottianism back into Southcott, and bury them with her. The prophetess's body itself became weirdly composed out of printed matter. After her death, Southcott was autopsied in public, as each of her attending physicians published his own pamphlet on the (increasingly rotten) state of her corpse—all of which were frantically recycled in the London press. The media frenzy allowed her "pregnancy" to be figured as an error of individual, rather than social production, signifying a personal rather than a cultural deformation. "Shiloh"—and all the attention showered upon him—was made symptomatic only of the illness of his "mother," rather than the pathologies of polite taste. Coverage of Southcott's texts had always been exercises in contempt, with one reviewer

102. Though Cheyne's interests were ultimately humoral and physiological, he introduced his discussion with a treatment of the cultural pathology that followed from unprecedented affluence: "The Title I have chosen for this Treatise, is a Reproach universally thrown on this Island by Foreigners, and all our Neighbours on the Continent, by whom nervous Distempers, Spleen, Vapours, and Lowness of Spirits, are in Derision, called the ENGLISH MALADY. And I wish there were not so good Grounds for this Reflection. The Moisture of our Air, the Variableness of our Weather, (from our Situation amidst the Ocean) the Rankness and Fertility of our Soil, the Richness and Heaviness of our Food, the Wealth and Abundance of the Inhabitants (from their universal Trade), the Inactivity and sedentary Occupations of the better Sort (among whom this Evil mostly rages) and the Humour of living in great, populous and consequently unhealthy Towns, have brought forth a Class and Set of Distempers, with atrocious and Frightful Symptoms, scarce known to our Ancestors, and never rising to such fatal Heights, nor afflicting such Numbers in any other known Nation." George Cheyne, *The English Malady* (London: G. Strahan, 1733), i-ii.

103. *Analectic Magazine*, "Devotional Somnium," 500.

abandoning his essay with, “Poh!—it smells rank! How long must lewdness and debauchery be thus permitted to insult both religion and common sense!”¹⁰⁴ But her dissection transitioned this valedictory disgust to her body, neatly dropping all notice of her books: that Regency print culture judged the exhumation of a rotting corpse a fitter object for public attention than Southcott’s verse-prophecies testifies to the depth of the anxiety they stirred. Time and again, articles emphasized the peculiar, almost unnatural decay of Southcott. The *Times* reported that Joanna’s body was coming apart at the seams “in such a high degree of putrefaction, that we could not trust to the limbs to convey it, and it was accordingly moved to the table on a sheet.”¹⁰⁵ The *Edinburgh Review* explained, “The dead body was kept warm for four days, according to her own previous directions, in hopes of a revival, and the birth of the promised child; it was not consigned to the dissection, till putrefaction had rendered it extremely offensive.”¹⁰⁶ Though Southcott had seemed on the verge of escaping early modern formations of bodily mysticism, here was the return of repressed medievalism. There must have been, the *Times* and the *Edinburgh* implied, a quasi-supernatural judgment in her hasty decomposition, that most ancient test of saints, and her flesh was finally conquered by the ecological and material logics her spiritual pregnancy had claimed to transcend.

So foul had Southcott’s body become—layered as it was under the flannel blankets brought by her well-meaning followers, who hoped to keep the infant Shiloh warm—that the autopsy procedure was abandoned midway. The attending physicians spared no gruesomeness. Dr. Mathias offered that “the rest of the viscera were not examined minutely, from the extreme offensiveness of the body,”¹⁰⁷ while Dr. Reece chuckled that “the body was in so highly a putrid state, that it was thought unnecessary to examine the brain, where it was probable all the mischief lay.”¹⁰⁸ The medical agreement on her “extreme offensiveness” is exceptional. Paul Youngquist argues that most early nineteenth-century anatomists of the female body were careful to “eschew visceral response,” in order “to assert an affective threshold above which disciplined knowledge holds dispassionate sway,” as “all that falls below becomes its other,” figuring

104. *La Belle Assemblée*, October 1814, 152.

105. *Times*, January 9, 1815, p. 3, col. d.

106. “Joanna Southcott,” *Edinburgh Review* 24 (February 1815): 453–71 (469).

107. Mathias, *Case of Joanna Southcott*, 16.

108. Reece quoted in Paley, “William Blake, the Prince of the Hebrews, and The Woman Clothed with the Sun,” 288.

women as “existentially anonymous, interchangeable husks of flesh.”¹⁰⁹ But there was nothing “dispassionate,” and certainly nothing “existentially anonymous,” about the stylized horror in the medical testimony on Southcott, and the point of this autopsy was, I think, to fixate on the contemptible vileness of her body, rather than on whatever that body might signify.

This was a procedure designed to circumvent knowledge rather than reveal it, excusing the nation from any further reflections on the matter of Joanna Southcott. That Reece thought it “unnecessary” to complete his examination due to the revoltingly “putrid state” of his subject argues that this procedure did not penetrate the body in order to disclose secrets, but to keep them well hidden: it was a form of professional attention that authorized cultural inattention. Southcott’s body was made to disclose just enough to disclose no more—having speculatively isolated “all the mischief” in her physiology, no further argument or observation was necessary, and Southcott, and Southcottianism, were silently filed away. Her last creation, like all her prophecies, was fraudulently vacuous, the disgusting result of so much hot air. The final diagnosis of Shiloh, and of Southcott, was that “the flatus of the intestines satisfactorily accounts for the extraordinary size of the deceased.”¹¹⁰

In a handful of months after her death, Southcott was so successfully reincorporated into disciplinary logics that she became literally unheard, vanishing from the records that might otherwise have carried her to us today. It would be histrionic to call this a conspiracy of silence, especially as there was nothing secretive about the decision: it was enshrined in the public sentence of the law, for all to see. Southcott’s pregnancy had made her into an object of impossible attention, as the ubiquity of the gossip that enveloped her precluded any textual registration—as she became a figure of universal interest, she was, legally, rendered entirely illegible. By 1815, she had been formally recuperated into the grammars of female decorum she had so thoroughly violated, and the case of *Ditchburn v. Goldsmith* allegorizes Southcott’s disappearance from Regency culture, and its subsequent histories. “This was,” reported the *Annual Register*, “an action between inhabitants of Gravesend, upon a wager laid by the defendant, who was a preacher of the doctrines of the late Joanna Southcott, of £200 to £100 that she would be delivered of a male child on or before the 1st of November last.” Yet the preacher was luckier in his

109. Paul Youngquist, *Monstrosities: Bodies and British Romanticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2003), 135–38.

110. Mathias, *Case of Joanna Southcott*, 15–16.

defense than in his doctrine. He leaned on a precedent from Lord Mansfield, that any wager “as would ‘affect the interest or the feeling of a third person; for instance, that such woman has committed adultery, or that an unmarried woman has had a bastard’” could not be heard by an English court. Lord Chief Justice Gibbs agreed, dismissing the case, refusing to “try the extent of a woman’s chastity and delicacy in an action upon a wager,” and establishing the impossibility of any future considerations of Joanna Southcott by any court.¹¹¹

This technical act of oblivion figured a more general forgetting. Culture as well as Law exiled into polite silence the chatter and body of an old woman, the last records of her language and form narrating only the anonymity to which both had decayed beyond recovery. As the *Times* reported in its final dispatch, Southcott’s fame could never recover from her burial. Her pallbearers masqueraded in silence, “so completely had they succeeded in disguising themselves, that not a feature was visible,” while “they abstained from all conversation.” These misdirections indicated the darker obscurity of their charge:

The few people whom curiosity attracted round the grave had not the slightest suspicion that the coffin contained the remains of Joanna Southcott. Such precautions were taken, that it was impossible the secret could prematurely transpire.¹¹²

The nation interred not just Joanna’s enthusiasm, but its own, comfortably secure that neither could be reanimated from beyond the grave. One of the dissecting physicians, triumphing over the wrecked body, confidently jested that “certainly the same power that could raise a putrid body, could raise one that had been opened.”¹¹³ But as Mary Shelley would teach a handful of years later, the enthusiasms haunting polite Romantic culture wouldn’t stay buried so easily.

111. “Ditchburn v. Goldsmith,” in *The Annual Register, or, A View of the History, Politics, and Literature for the Year 1815* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, Joy, et alii, 1816), 289–90.

112. *Times*, January 9, 1815, p. 3, col. c.

113. *Times*, January 9, 1815, p. 3, col. d.