To speak of Gutenberg's literary contributions seems, at first glance, perverse, for he left behind no lyrical or prose compositions, if any ever existed. Instead, his life is known, all too incompletely, from official documents and from the products of his press.\footnote{The image of Gutenberg that has emerged from centuries of scrutinizing legal briefs and ink blots is a combination of technological innovator, calculating merchant, and legal ne’er-do-well. While studies of Gutenberg since Aloys Ruppel’s have yielded some new insights, none of the competing Gutenberg biographies have gained unreserved acceptance. The outlines of Gutenberg’s life are reasonably well established: his birth in Mainz near the turn of the fifteenth century; his first business ventures in Strasbourg in the 1430s and 1440s; and then his return to Mainz, where the enterprise of printing commenced in the early 1450s. What remains stubbornly unknown is how Gutenberg’s earlier life affected his invention, how early the first experiments with movable type began, and what thoughts inspired them.}

While Gutenberg’s name has become synonymous with epoch-making inventions, it is not always possible to clearly separate Johannes Gutenberg the fifteenth-century citizen of Mainz, Gutenberg the eponymous figurehead of early printing, and Gutenberg, Inc., the consortium of financial, textual, and technological expertise that made the first printed works possible but whose individual members might also take one another to court.
Here, “Gutenberg” will have to serve as shorthand for “almost certainly Johannes Gutenberg, undoubtedly acting in concert with one or more of his associates and assistants in the joint undertaking that produced the earliest printed books in Europe.”

After all the technical issues concerning early printing have been resolved or set aside, the question of Gutenberg’s thought processes and motivations remains. To what extent did Gutenberg comprehend, participate in, or respond to particular cultural impulses? Gutenberg’s invention, a printing press using movable metal type, had wide-reaching influence on intellectual history, but what intellectual currents influenced his own invention? If Illich is correct that innovation is the result of understanding the potential and symbolic significance of existing tools, then there are implications for Gutenberg and his movable type: rather than either the press making printed books possible or the increased demand for books requiring the invention of printing, one would say that Johannes Gutenberg recognized in the constellation of letters, books, and the press a new potential that justified years of experimentation and thousands of gulden in debt. What potential might he have perceived? The lack of documents that could answer the question directly leaves historians in a highly unsatisfactory state of uncertainty. Scholars of literature, accustomed to treating fiction and narrative as sites of reflection on cultural and intellectual issues, might attempt a literary analysis, if there were any literary works authored by Gutenberg.

This is the point in the story where an inconspicuous piece of paper falls out of a file folder and into the hands of scholars. Or, rather, at the time the piece of paper was first noticed in 1892, it was a file folder, having served for centuries as an outer wrapper for archival records. On front and back were the remains of several lines of printed text, but the leaf had been trimmed so that lines were missing from the top and bottom of the page. When donated to the Gutenberg Museum in 1903, print historians recognized it as a rare specimen of Gutenberg’s earliest typeface, a font developed prior to the one used for the famous forty-two-line Bible of 1454–55. Upon close inspection, the type appeared to be from a very early stage of use, before the letters acquired signs of wear and damage and before a few letters were replaced by slightly different ones. It was, by all appearances, a leaf from the oldest known printed book. But what book was it, and how old was it? As it had clearly been printed before another product of Gutenberg’s press known as the Astronomical Calendar for 1448, it was assigned to the years
1444–47, Gutenberg’s earliest years in Mainz. The German text on one side of the leaf exhorted the reader to faith and good works, while the other side described the Last Judgment, and thus Edward Schröder christened the text the “Fragment vom Weltgericht” (fragment of the Last Judgment).4

The name lasted for four years. In 1908, Karl Reuschel brought to Schröder’s attention that the text was, in fact, a section of the Sibyl’s Prophecy, a fourteenth-century poem of several hundred lines known in various versions from numerous fifteenth-century manuscripts.5 In most versions, the poem begins with the legend of the wood of the Cross: Adam, on his deathbed, asks his son to return to paradise and retrieve a branch of the Tree of Life, which, according to an angel, will restore Adam’s health.6 The son complies, but upon his return, Adam is already dead, and the son thinks his journey has been in vain. He plants the branch on Adam’s grave, where it grows into a majestic tree. There it remains until Solomon sends his workers to gather lumber for his building projects. The workers fell the tree and plane its trunk into a board, but they can find no use for it in the temple, and so it is used instead as a rough bridge across a brook to Solomon’s palace. The Sibyl, having heard of Solomon’s wisdom, comes to visit the king, and her explanation of the beam’s true significance and narration of future events comprise the bulk of the poem. In some manuscripts, the Sibyl’s Prophecy is divided into two sections and closes after around 750 lines with the text as found on the fragmentary leaf in Mainz, while other manuscripts add a third section.

The dating of the Sibyl’s Prophecy to the 1440s lasted four decades longer than the original name, until Carl Wehmer determined that the misnamed Astronomical Calendar for 1448, the terminus ante quem for dating Gutenberg’s edition of the Sibyl’s Prophecy, was actually a planetary table for lay astrologers and had been printed around 1458, a decade later than originally thought.7 Over the course of the twentieth century, Gutenberg’s role in the invention of printing was questioned and reaffirmed, doubts about his association with the typeface used in the Sibyl’s Prophecy (known as the DK type, for other works printed with it, or the B 36 type, for a later Bible edition) surfaced and were rebutted, and the sequence of early prints was rearranged. The status of the Sibyl’s Prophecy as the oldest known work from Gutenberg’s press has been both reiterated and denied,8 but there is no doubt that it is a very early product of Gutenberg and his associates, printed perhaps in 1452–53.

There is much that cannot be known with certainty about a book pre-
served in only a single fragmentary leaf: its complete length, whether it contained the entire text or only a portion of it, whether customers greeted it with enthusiasm or scorn, or what impulses motivated its setting in type. But it seems likely that the Sibyl’s Prophecy was the site of reflection on cultural issues not only for its anonymous fourteenth-century author but also for its fifteenth-century printer and that Johannes Gutenberg was committing an essentially literary act by putting it into print. In Mainz of the early 1450s, printing a German text was a bold undertaking.\(^9\) The other works printed by Gutenberg and his associates in this earliest period of printing consist of three equally fragmentary editions of the elementary Latin grammar of Donatus. Although elementary grammars also reflect readers’ textual needs and capabilities—Neddermeyer refers to them, with conscious exaggeration, as “user’s manuals” for the new medium\(^10\)—the Sibyl’s Prophecy could not be more different from a work with a clearly defined place in the world of Latin textuality and a well-understood set of customers in grammar school pupils. The Sibyl’s Prophecy is German rather than Latin, literary rather than utilitarian, narrative rather than didactic. Whether any of the existing Latin grammars were printed before the Sibyl’s Prophecy is uncertain, but the DK type had clearly been intended for printing Latin works, as the typeface lacked a majuscule W or Z, which occur rarely in Latin but very frequently in German.\(^11\) This is not surprising for a time in which literacy in most cases still implied the ability to read Latin, but it does indicate that Gutenberg had some experience with printing by the time he published the Sibyl’s Prophecy and that its publication cut against the existing contours of literacy and the capabilities of his press. Publication in German also seems unusual considered against the other products of Gutenberg and his associates. Of sixty-three known editions printed with the types of the thirty-six-line and forty-two-line Bibles, only six are in German, and only one other of these vernacular works is dated earlier than 1456.

Whatever the particular circumstances of its origin may have been, we may assume that the choice to print the Sibyl’s Prophecy was reached only after careful deliberation. Like an author who hopes to publish a novel, Gutenberg had to know his audience, including their desires and needs for written material as well as their economic capacities. It is an axiom of book history that the financial context of printing is fundamentally different from the market for manuscript literature, even allowing for early efforts to produce multiple copies of a book by hand in anticipation of customer de-
mand, such as the pecia system of copying by signatures in use at fourteenth-century universities or Diebold Lauber’s workshop for manuscript books. A single manuscript might please the taste only of the copyist or a patron; a half-dozen copies that find no buyers constitute a cause for concern and a signal to produce no more for the present; but hundreds of unsold copies of a printed book might be (and, in fact, often were) an existence-threatening catastrophe for an early printer. The investments in trained labor and specialized materials required to set a work in type were incomparably higher than the requirements for writing a single copy of the same text by hand, even before the first quire had been printed. For Gutenberg, testing the uncharted waters of textual mass production, there was no prior experience from which to seek guidance. The entrepreneurial economics of early printing necessitated careful thought in advance about the text and its eventual readers.

Printing the Sibyl’s Prophecy also required reflection on the medium of print and its possibilities. The fragmentary leaf now in Mainz does not display the harmonious layout later achieved in the forty-two-line Bible or even that of the thirty-six-line Bible produced with the same DK typeface toward the end of the decade. Instead, the bases of each letter rise off the line or fall below it. The printing process had not yet achieved the capability that it would reach within a few years. When the Sibyl’s Prophecy was printed, Gutenberg was still working on a solution for presenting texts by means of movable type. An awareness of the potential and current limitations of the medium stared back at him from every page.

READING FRAGMENTS

Situating the Sibyl’s Prophecy in its literary and cultural context requires us to come to grips with a fragmentary object. Incomplete texts and damaged manuscripts belong to medievalists’ stock-in-trade. They are the founding documents of their disciplines, from the Lay of Hildebrand to Beowulf. More than just manuscript witnesses of a once-whole work, the interpretation of fragments can demand the expenditure of considerable effort and also require straying from the relative safety of an established text. Interpreting a text that has largely disappeared will never entirely escape the realm of the probabilistic. The thirty lines of text preserved in Mainz will not serve here as philological evidence for determining affinities among manuscripts and early print editions, a project still awaiting completion.
The fragment of Gutenberg’s *Sibyl’s Prophecy* instead forms the point of departure for discovering as much as can be said with some degree of certainty about the work’s situation in the intellectual and cultural context of early printing.

How far can we extend the fragment of the *Sibyl’s Prophecy*? On the most minimal graphic level, there are damaged letters, partial words, and incomplete lines of text for which the surviving portions provide clues about the missing segments, as does the comparison with other versions of the text. The third word of the first line, for example, has been trimmed away, leaving at the beginning only a row of five minims, the identical lower legs out of which are constructed letters such as \( m, u, i, \) or \( n \). Based on familiarity with the typeface, the language, and the text, we can project the remaining letter bases upward and read the word as *mußen* (rather than, say, *iiiiße*) with a very high degree of certainty. The bottom of the fragmentary leaf presents only a few hints of shafts, arches, and dashes, but it is enough to keep extending the text for one more line, as Frieder Schanze has done.\(^{15}\)

It would be foolish to reconstruct specific letters or precise wording beyond this, but there remains much more that can be said about the work. Almost certainly, the original edition contained some version of the poem in its entirety, rather than a small portion of the text on a single leaf.\(^{16}\) It is probable, however, that the fragment contains the original work’s last two pages. The fragment contains lines 703–19 on one side and 732–46 on the other, so that after the last line, there would have been just enough room to complete a two-section version of the *Sibyl’s Prophecy*. The preserved text also bears closer affinities to the two-section versions of 748 lines.\(^{17}\) To print something like all or nearly all the lines would have required twelve to fourteen leaves, a technical undertaking well within Gutenberg’s capabilities, as the extent is identical to that of the Donatus editions printed at the same time. If we cannot quite fill our imagined pages with a precise sequence of words and letters, we can at least probabilistically fill them with the story as it is known in extant manuscripts of the two-section version of the *Sibyl’s Prophecy*.

Any reading of the *Sibyl’s Prophecy* must fit the context of Gutenberg’s early editions and the material evidence of contemporary manuscripts. On these grounds, one strand of interpretation has failed, although it found some support among well-known scholars and can still be found in reference works. Gutenberg biographer Albert Kapr and media and communications theoretician Michael Giesecke both accept, in whole or in part, the
proposal of Gottfried Zedler that connected the original poem to fourteenth-century heretical movements and that linked Gutenberg’s edition to fifteenth-century German politics. According to Zedler, the author of the *Sibyl’s Prophecy* was a follower or associate of Konrad Schmid, leader and prophet of the Thuringian flagellants who were violently suppressed in 1369. The original *Sibyl’s Prophecy* had foreseen the glorious return of Frederick II (1220–50), and the legendary Emperor Frederick is, in this account, none other than the flagellant leader Schmid. Nadja Varbanec extended this line of reasoning further, arguing that Schmid himself was the author of the *Sibyl’s Prophecy*, and Kapr and Giesecke follow her attribution. According to Zedler, Gutenberg’s choice to print the *Sibyl’s Prophecy* reflected his understanding of popular interests in heretical and anti-ecclesiastical ideas, while the long delay before a second edition appeared (in a longer, religiously unassailable version of the poem) was due to clerical resistance.

Kapr takes a somewhat different view, rejecting the notion that Gutenberg was associated with heretical movements and emphasizing instead that Gutenberg’s printing of the *Sibyl’s Prophecy* was a response to contemporary political events that was intended to capitalize on enthusiasm for Frederick III (1440–93) and concern over Turkish advances. Kapr further argues that disappointment with Frederick III after 1444 would have made publication of the *Sibyl’s Prophecy* after that year unlikely, so that it must have been printed between 1440 and 1444, while Gutenberg was still in Strasbourg. Giesecke follows Kapr’s dating and sees Gutenberg’s publication of the *Sibyl’s Prophecy* as part of a tradition of reformist publishing. As a manuscript text, in Giesecke’s view, the *Sibyl’s Prophecy* was the sacred text of a conspirative textual community, and Konrad Schmid was its authoritative interpreter; in the medium of print, the work lost much of its magical aura, and the public it created for itself was no longer a secretive conspiracy but a public political movement.

Little, if anything, of the interpretive tradition from Zedler to Kapr to Giesecke has proved to be correct. The author and place of origin of the *Sibyl’s Prophecy* are still considered unknown. Schanze regards the attribution to Konrad Schmid and the Thuringian flagellants as a “fanciful combination.” We can expect to find fifteenth-century attitudes toward the *Sibyl’s Prophecy* reflected in the other works with which it was collected, but Schanze’s study of the manuscript context of the *Sibyl’s Prophecy* finds not the least evidence for any heretical associations with the text. The frequency represented by the forty-four manuscripts preserving the work is far be-
yond what might be plausible for a heretical or subversive text, but it is quite believable for a popular vernacular work with religious and devotional elements. Not only is there no known connection between Gutenberg and heretical movements, but the other editions produced by Gutenberg and his associates are similarly lacking in heretical or reformist sentiment. Kapr’s dating of Gutenberg’s edition to the early 1440s is unnecessary, as manuscript panegyrics comparing Frederick III to a prophesied emperor of the end times appeared in the 1450s, and Zedler cites a song comparing Frederick III to the emperor of the Sibyl’s Prophecy composed in 1474. The publication of the Sibyl’s Prophecy is not necessarily a response to a specific event, such as Frederick’s coronation. In the text, the mythical Frederick does not play a central role, and any number of other points, equally or more prominent than a similarity to the reigning Holy Roman Emperor, could have attracted readers to the text in the mid-fifteenth century. Kapr’s dating is also untenably early, as the Sibyl’s Prophecy fragment and the Turk Calendar of 1454–55 are very similar in their execution, by no means reflecting a decade of technical refinement between them. Schanze’s consideration of this evidence found that readers’ primary interest lay in the work’s various religious aspects via its similarities to saints’ legends, crucifixion accounts, and Christian eschatology.

Yet Gutenberg’s decision to print the Sibyl’s Prophecy has interpretive potential that is left unexplored by regarding it only as a popular religious work. While Schanze’s observation that the Sibyl’s Prophecy was a popular religious work that could be read in many ways is undoubtedly correct, why did Gutenberg print this work and not another? The printing of a vernacular literary text at a time when Gutenberg and his associates specialized in elementary Latin grammars, with their large and well-defined set of customers, suggests that something in addition to mercantile considerations motivated the edition. Regarding the printing of the Sibyl’s Prophecy as an act of literary creation seems particularly appropriate in light of how the text (as we may assume it once existed) appears to reflect on its own creation: Gutenberg, the first entrepreneurial printer, was forced to predict the future demand for his wares and the fortunes of his books in the hands of their readers; the work he chose to print was the Sibyl’s Prophecy, a prophetic work that comments, in its own way, on prophecy and reading. Since classical antiquity, the Sibyl has been a notably literate prophet whose wisdom, derived from signs she reads in the stars, allows her to interpret a series of letters as the names of several emperors in succession. What the
Sibyl’s Prophecy and the Latin grammars printed around the same time have in common is a central concern with the power and potential of literacy. Can the Sibyl’s Prophecy be described, without straining credulity, as a book about printing, an inventor’s reflection on the nature of textuality in the galaxy he was creating, or an attempt to explain the possibilities of a new medium to the first mass audience in Europe? One way to address the question of what Gutenberg saw in the Sibyl’s Prophecy is to consider the question of what his contemporaries saw in it, as attested by the poem’s fifteenth-century manuscript context, and so I will next revisit the fifteenth-century context of the Sibyl’s Prophecy in manuscript and print.

MANUSCRIPT CONTEXT

A few of the manuscript witnesses might be considered precursors to the Sibyl’s Prophecy as a work that reflects on the nature of literacy. Without dismissing Schanze’s conclusion that the Sibyl’s Prophecy was read primarily out of devotional interest, a closer look at some of the evidence suggests that religious devotion does not entirely explain some strands of reception. In a number of manuscripts, the Sibyl’s Prophecy appears to be not just one of the collected texts but a narrative explanation or justification for the entire volume. The poem provides, in some cases, a context in sacred history for secular affairs and, in others, a narrative justification for prognostication, contexts that Schanze dismisses as essentially random or whimsical. Other manuscripts that place the Sibyl’s Prophecy in a clearly religious context suggest a more specific interest in communication and the transmission of knowledge.

The narrative function of the Sibyl’s Prophecy is most readily seen in its manuscript associations with historical chronicles. Schanze, who suggests that the Sibyl’s Prophecy might serve to mark the end of history, otherwise regards the association with chronicles as “proximity without relationship.” But in addition to describing the end of the world and the completion of history, the Sibyl’s Prophecy places contemporary events of the Middle Ages, including the struggles for imperial succession, within the entire context of salvation history, from the Creation to the Crucifixion to the Second Coming.

One particularly striking example is a fifteenth-century manuscript (Nuremberg, Staatsarchiv, Reichsstadt Nürnberg Handschriften, no. 58) that is both a family chronicle of the Schürstabs of Nuremberg and an ac-
account of various battles, particularly Nuremberg’s fifteenth-century wars, and detailed plans for the city’s defense. The connection of urban politics and warfare with family history is not surprising, considering that the Schürstabs provided a mayor of Nuremberg and other leading city officials. The records of Nuremberg’s food stores, parish churches, and personnel for its fortifications are not just a matter of family or military history, however. The manuscript contains, at its core, two literary texts that provide a narrative framework for the manuscript’s analytical and tabular summary of information. One of these is an account of Charlemagne’s legendary victory over the heathens at Regensburg, which links the manuscript’s listing of Nuremberg’s defensive measures to other imperial cities and associates the manuscript’s military chronicles to the sacral warfare of the Holy Roman Emperors. Following this, the Sibyl’s Prophecy places the emperors and their warfare in the context of salvation history. The inclusion of the two literary texts helps present the Schürstabs as defenders not just of a city but of the Holy Roman Empire and, in turn, of the whole Christian narrative.

One might also see the transmission of the Sibyl’s Prophecy at the interface of sacred and secular history in a manuscript from 1440 now in Bern (Burgerbibliothek Cod. 537), which preserves the Sibyl’s Prophecy along with a translation into German prose of a French poem on the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans: the description of a secular event with sacral implications is followed by a rendition into verse of all salvation history in the form of the Sibyl’s Prophecy. In a late sixteenth-century manuscript (Aarau, Aargauer Kantonsbibliothek Ms WettF 33), the Sibyl’s Prophecy follows a rhymed account of the second Kappeler War of 1531, in which Ulrich Zwingli fell in battle against Catholic forces, a sacralized account of Europe’s first war of religion after the Reformation. The same manuscript contains both additional historical texts and another prophetic work in verse, the Nollhart of Pamphilus Gengenbach, in which the Sibyl and other prophetic figures admonish various listeners, including the pope.

In two manuscripts, both written in the mid-1450s, the Sibyl’s Prophecy appears to have a similar function of providing narrative contextualization, but, in these cases, for prognostic texts. One originally Swiss manuscript (now Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek cgm 6351) begins with seventy leaves devoted to various ways to master time. Some of these are calendrical, describing methods to determine feast days of the liturgical year or to calculate leap years; other texts are astronomical, describing the calculation of moon phases, the zodiacal signs, or the nature and astrological
significance of the seven planets; some texts are astromedical, prescribing rules and identifying bad days for bloodletting; and a number of texts are prognostic, describing lucky and unlucky days, weather prediction rules, the influence of each week day on nativities, a New Year’s prognostic, and “Daniel’s Prophecy,” actually a list of favorable and unfavorable activities for each day of the moon’s cycle. These prognostic texts are interspersed with short devotional extracts, and the conclusion is formed by the German Cato and the Sibyl’s Prophecy.

In a Bavarian manuscript (Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum Hs 16007), the Sibyl’s Prophecy opens a codex otherwise containing prose texts on birth prognostics, days that were lucky or favorable for bloodletting, and descriptions of zodiacal signs and the planets, as well as other practical texts. For Schanze, the Sibyl’s Prophecy appears there as a “foreign body” in the context of prognostic practices, as if there could be no connection between the Sibyl’s reading the future in the stars and fifteenth-century attempts to do the same. It rather seems more likely that the account of the Sibyl’s audience before Solomon in these manuscripts serves as a narrative contextualization and legitimization of the prognostic practices that they record, including the astrological reading of celestial signs. The association of sibylline and other prophetic material with astrology and prognostication is, in any case, found again in later printed works of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, so that the appearance of this association already in fifteenth-century manuscripts is not surprising.

The Sibyl’s Prophecy, with its thematic focus on reading, also appears to serve as a narrative contextualization and legitimization of literacy itself. An early fifteenth-century manuscript (Nuremberg, Stadtbibliothek Cent. VI, 43º), formerly owned by Katharina Tucher and then the St. Katherine cloister in Nuremberg, opens with the German Lucidarius, followed by various legends, exempla, and tracts, before closing with the Questions of the Astronomy Master to the Devil (Hort von der Astronomie) and the Sibyl’s Prophecy. Schanze notes that both the last two works contain the legend of the wood of the Cross, yet the manuscript as a whole not only preserves the Sibyl’s Prophecy in the context of religious devotion but, more specifically, addresses the limits and possibilities of communication and transmitting knowledge. The Lucidarius, the Questions of the Astronomy Master, and the Sibyl’s Prophecy, as well as the manuscript’s extract from Heinrich Seuse’s Book of Eternal Wisdom, are all dialogues in which knowledge is won from arcane sources. Several of the tracts on purgatory in the Tundalus tradition
that follow the Lucidarius, while not dialogues, again focus thematically on the obtaining and distribution of knowledge. The power of the written word is also exemplified in another tract, which relates how a priest celebrating Mass discerns a devil writing on a cowhide. The priest asks the devil what he was doing, and the devil answers that he was compiling a list of sins committed by the communicants. The priest tells his congregation what he has seen, whereupon the people repent, and the words documenting their sins are erased from the cowhide. These and similar texts are found in association with the Sibyl’s Prophecy in other manuscripts as well: Chur, Staatsarchiv Graubünden Cod. B 1 (Lucidarius), Esztergom Franciscan convent Cod. 11 (Tundalus and Lucidarius), Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek cgm 746 (Questions of the Astronomy Master to the Devil), Trier, Stadtbibliothek Hs. 118/490 8° (Lucidarius).

While the association of the Sibyl’s Prophecy with the Lucidarius may seem accidental, the title page and illustrations of later Lucidarius editions suggests that the separation between the two works was perhaps not as wide as one might think. Fifteenth-century editions of the Lucidarius regularly open with a woodcut of a dialogue between a master and disciple against a background of stars, similar to the constellation of Solomon, the Sibyl, and a star used to illustrate several editions of the Sibyl’s Prophecy (see figure 2). The preface of the Lucidarius positions the work as prophetic revelation of arcane knowledge: it states that the Lucidarius contains teachings and wisdom that are hidden from other books; and it states that the author is the disciple who poses questions, while the answering teacher is the Holy Spirit. The preface of the Lucidarius even echoes the first line of the Sibyl’s Prophecy, “God who always was and is without end.”

While the Questions of the Astronomy Master to the Devil shares the concern for knowledge and communication with the Sibyl’s Prophecy, the differences between the two works are instructive. The Sibyl’s prophesying is based on her reading of the stars, as well as her interpretation of acronymic letters, both of which affirm learning and literacy. The astronomer’s diabolical source and necromantic method must be considered dubious in a Christian context, and they represent not an affirmation of literacy but, rather, the limits of knowledge available from books. In a scene that later forms the opening of Goethe’s Faust, when the astronomer demands to know everything about earth, paradise, hell, and purgatory, the devil imprisoned in a jar snaps back that the astronomer could just as easily find everything he was looking for written in books. “I have read much of
Fig. 2. The Sibyl and Solomon, from the title page of Heinrich Knoblochtzer’s edition of the *Sibyl’s Prophecy*, ca. 1492. (Courtesy of Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg.)
strange wonders that I barely understand,” the astronomer replies. “I want true knowledge of it from your mouth. Tell me of each thing in turn!”

Where the astronomer embodies the limitations of reading and the unreliability of writing, the Sibyl’s prophetic interpretation of signs attests a fundamentally positive view of reading that is also consistent with the economic interests of Gutenberg and his followers.

PRINT CONTEXT

While the manuscript evidence connecting the *Sibyl’s Prophecy* to prognostic texts is less common than appearances of the poem in devotional contexts, the connection is nevertheless present. In the context of the earliest vernacular printed works, the opposite holds true: while Gutenberg used his earliest typeface for several prognostic works, there are no known vernacular devotional works from him and his associates in Mainz. If printing the *Sibyl’s Prophecy* was meant to appeal to the market for devotional texts, the absence of additional examples of the genre from his press is curious. In contrast to the lack of printed devotional works, all known German works from Gutenberg’s press have thematic similarities with prognostic and prophetic works that appeared in print during the following century.

One can find intentionality not just in the arrangement of texts copied into a particular manuscript but also in the selection of works chosen for publication by a particular printer. No printer, not even the first one, could meet the expectations and requirements of all readers. To compete effectively against other printers or a still-healthy manuscript trade, specialization was necessary. A printer had to understand what works could be profitably manufactured considering the printer’s production capabilities and distribution networks and the customer expectations of a given market segment. Not every printer could produce the volumes appropriate for monastic institutions, for example, and not everyone who could produce them had the established business networks to sell the printed wares. To succeed and even to survive, printers had to know what formats they could produce, what price their customers were willing to pay, and what kinds of texts they were interested in reading.

Michael Clanchy categorized the works printed in the first decade of printing as belonging to sacred, learned, or bureaucratic literacy and identified vernacular literacy as a catchall fourth category with a broad audience outside the learned elite and peripheral to the enterprise of printing,
although he did note a certain concern with prognostication common to a number of the works in the vernacular category.\textsuperscript{31} Already in 1948, however, Carl Wehmer had recognized the thematic and typographic similarity of several early Mainz prints: “And so the content of the Astronomical Calendar fits satisfyingly into a group of Mainz editions in whose vicinity it also belongs typographically. These editions printed in the same typeface include the astrological-political poem about the Turkish threat in the guise of a calendar for 1455, the Sibyl’s Book that was printed due to its prophecy of an Emperor Frederick who would triumph over the heathen, a German Cisioianus, and the astrological bloodletting calendar for 1457. A German astrological planetary table fits into the series of astrological-calendrical publication in every way.”\textsuperscript{32} The “astrological-political poem” Wehmer mentions here is the Turk Calendar of late 1454, the next known vernacular work printed after the Sibyl’s Prophecy.\textsuperscript{33} Ottoman Turk and other Islamic invaders had been well-established figures of Christian end-time speculation since the early Middle Ages, and the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and further incursions into Christian Europe ensured that they continued to play that role for centuries to come. The Turk Calendar makes use of a contemporary literary genre of verse arranged by calendar month to exhort Christians to resist the Turks.\textsuperscript{34} The Cisioianus, a series of verses to aid memorizing and calculating the dates of church feasts, was printed as a broadside around 1457. The “astrological bloodletting calendar,” often referred to as the Laxierkalender or Aderlasskalender, another broadside print, was a calendar of propitious days for bloodletting and other purgative exercises and is the only Latin work among those mentioned here. The only vernacular edition of Gutenberg’s not mentioned by Wehmer is the German translation of Calixtus III’s papal bull against the Turks printed in 1456. Considering the inclusion of the Sibyl’s Prophecy and the Turk Calendar, both the German bull and its Latin original also fit easily into this group. In their typeface (in all cases except the papal bull) and language (in all cases except the Laxierkalender), these works printed by Gutenberg and his associates in Mainz, both before and after their legal conflicts of 1455, constitute a recognizable print context for the Sibyl’s Prophecy that might be described as prognostic literacy.

Rather than being peripheral to print textuality or diverse members of a catchall category, the works of prognostic literacy are central to Gutenberg’s publication program. Of the sixty-five known editions in the type of the thirty-six-line or forty-two-line Bibles, fifty are editions, often fragmentary
and undated, of the elementary Latin grammar of Donatus. If we set aside these editions, we are left with ten remaining Latin editions, compared to which the five vernacular editions no longer seem a mere afterthought. Latin is clearly the language of sacred literacy, with three Bible editions and three additional ecclesiastic texts. The remaining Latin texts, including the papal bull against the Turks and two editions of indulgences for those who take up the struggle against them, share a concern with Islamic invasion also found in editions of vernacular works.

The category of prognostic literacy includes various kinds of future chronologies, from propitious days for medicinal bleeding to end-time eschatology. The Turk Calendar provides a measure of unity to the group by connecting calendrical conventions to popular perception of the Turks as agents of the Antichrist in the end times, while the Sibyl’s Prophecy provides an overarching narrative framework that finds a place in salvation history for both the Antichrist and astrological prognostication based on observing the heavens. Among the various editions from Gutenberg’s workshop that address concerns with chronology and prognostication, it is the two literary works among them that connect astrological observation of the stars to all the traditional precursors of the Last Day within a coherent narrative. While there is no way to be certain how well Gutenberg’s edition of the Sibyl’s Prophecy sold, the repeated editions of vernacular prognostic works suggest that he met some success. There are various criteria by which one could classify the earliest printed editions, but by any measure, the Sibyl’s Prophecy is a central text of early printing.

Gutenberg proved prescient in anticipating the later popularity of prophetic tracts and prognostic booklets. These bibliographical cousins and descendants of the Sibyl’s Prophecy continually recombined prophetic utterance, astronomical observation, astrological prediction, and the Turks and other perceived minions of the Antichrist as signs of the end times. Consider, for example, the output of Conrad Zeninger’s press in Nuremberg in 1481, one of his earliest years of operation. In that year, Zeninger published in German the first edition of Birgitta’s Burden of the World, which included chapters attributed to Hildegard of Bingen, Joachim of Fiore, and a Sibyl. In addition to this prophetic compilation with a sibylline element, Zeninger also printed a broadside calendrical almanac; a tract on the end of the world ascribed to Vincent Ferrer; the Tract against the Turks, which cites Methodius and Birgitta, among other medieval prophets, as authorities for the Turks’ eventual downfall; and a Latin-German vocabulary
for preachers compiled with the help of Jodocus Eichmann, whose own sibylline tract would eventually form the basis of the most popular German Sibyl collection of the sixteenth-century. As in Gutenberg’s early works, prophecy, astrology, and literacy are near neighbors to each other in the early products of Conrad Zeninger.

The category of prognostic literacy might also encompass instructional manuals for casting lots, interpreting dreams, predicting the weather, or other forms of practical prognostication, which also frequently invoke the prophetic communicative framework: the medieval dream manuals that appear in print are attributed to the biblical prophets Daniel or Joseph (with at least forty-two editions between them before 1501), while another set of weather rules calls itself the “Revelation of Esdra the Prophet.” The urgency of providing prophetic cover to practical fortune-telling is evident in one manuscript’s introduction to Esdra’s weather rules, which insists, “These things were all revealed to me by God, and I have added nothing of myself, but rather I received all things from God’s inspiration.” Like predicting the weather by various rules of thumb or interpreting dreams by looking up items in a dream dictionary, casting lots to answer mundane questions would seem to lack any religious significance, yet the prophets were invoked even here. In an anonymous lot book printed in 1520, the user was to select answers to various questions, perhaps by drawing cards, while the path to the correct answer was organized according to thirty-six signs (the zodiac extended by additional animals), the four cardinal directions, the seven planets, twenty-two monarchs, and twenty-two prophets. Although the process seems to exemplify happenstance rather than revelation, the woodcuts that head each set of twenty-two verse answers depict the audience of a prophet before a monarch seated on a throne, just as the Sibyl appears before Solomon.

The first printed works, including the works of prognostic literacy, were no doubt popular enough to assure Gutenberg of sufficient customers for his wares within the economic context of early printing. Yet one may still ask why Gutenberg chose prognostic works rather than equally promising devotional texts that would have been equally amenable to print. One explanation is that prognostication can function as a metaphor for print literacy. As Marie Christin and others have argued concerning the history of writing, prognostication is the one type of reading that is truly originary, requiring no preceding act of human writing. The prognostic devices are imagined as screens, intermediaries, media on which the words of the gods
may be discerned without human interference. That was also the promise (if not the reality) of print: books could now be produced without pen, stylus, or quill, unmarred by the failings of a copyist, with the printed book as the screen on which original words could appear without flaw in any copy. The stars consulted by the Sibyl, like the alignment of planets consulted via print by readers of the Astronomical Calendar, are ostensibly prior to any act of human reading or writing, and so, too, it seemed, were the new books of the age of print, which were made available as never before and bypassed error-prone human copyists. Just as the Sibyl’s Prophecy appears to provide narrative context for history and prognostication in some manuscripts, one might also see in it a narrative explanation for print itself.

We expect a work of supreme cultural importance to look grander, more like Gutenberg’s forty-two-line Bible, which was, in some cases, printed on parchment and luxuriously illustrated. The Sibyl’s Prophecy remains a scrap of paper. Yet Gutenberg’s majestic Bible was merely a new way to supply texts to the traditional literate classes and luxury editions to wealthy patrons, while Gutenberg’s true accomplishment lay in providing the new urban readers with shorter literary works and pragmatic texts. The Sibyl’s Prophecy is not a random, periphery product of early printing but a core component of Gutenberg’s publication program and a central document of a new typographic literacy.

**READING LETTERS, READING THE HEAVENS**

Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders have observed that the Sibyl marks the transition from orality to fully alphabetic literacy in the prognostic tradition of classical antiquity. It is therefore apt that she appeared again to usher in the age of print. Already in Roman legend, the Sibyl wrote her prophecies in books, whose contents she offered for a price, unlike the oracles who dispensed wisdom through gnomic verbal utterance. The Sibyl’s essential literacy remains a part of the sibylline tradition of early modern Germany as found in the Prophecies of the Twelve Sibyls, a compilation of sibylline oracles that took form in the early sixteenth century and was reprinted throughout the next two centuries. The opening of the collection relates how a Sibyl offered nine books for sale to a Roman king. Her offer spurned, the Sibyl burns the books three at a time until the king meets her original price for the three remaining books, in which the king discovers the entire future of the Romans. In the ekphrastic description of Jodocus Eichmann,
this Sibyl holds one book on her knee with her left hand and holds an open book that contains “subtle things” in her right. 

Perhaps not accidentally, the Cicero who returns to sixteenth-century Germany in Nikodemus Frischlin’s 1585 comedy *Julius redivivus* responds to a description of the workings of the printing press by saying, “You remind me strongly of the unusual things that one writes about the Sibyl’s book.”

The route from Hellenic antiquity to Mainz in 1450 is long and convoluted, but the version of the *Sibyl’s Prophecy* known to and printed by Johannes Gutenberg retains the distinctly literate nature of the Sibyl. In the poem, the Sibyl derives her wisdom from reading the heavens, whose knowledge encompasses all of history from the Creation to the Last Judgment. When the Sibyl approaches Solomon’s palace and observes the beam that once grew on Adam’s grave, she honors it by wading through the brook instead of striding over it, and as a reward, her goose foot is healed to human form (one can safely regard the similarity between the Sibyl’s *Gänsefuß* and Gutenberg’s family name *Gänsefleisch* as mere coincidence). Solomon’s first question to the Sibyl concerns her reluctance to walk on the beam, to which the Sibyl replies that a man born from a virgin will die on it, which shall be a great help to all those who believe on him and his virginal mother. The rough wooden beam will form the cross on which Christ will be crucified and so restore health to Adam’s descendants in a way that his son had not understood. Solomon next asks the Sibyl about the source of her wisdom, and she answers that her source lies in the stars, which appear to be both astrological signifiers and a site of visionary revelation. “I saw a star in the heavens and a circle going around it. I saw within it a maid and a child and many future things that God has revealed to me,” she tells Solomon. In other passages, the Sibyl reiterates that the stars are signs that she can interpret: “I have seen in the stars what shall happen until the Last Day”; “I have seen in the stars what shall happen to the clergy.”

The Sibyl’s prophetic reading of the stars is based on the same cosmology that makes astrological prediction possible. According to this view of the universe, the heavens are a book, and God is the author. The opening of the Gospel of John served as the biblical basis for this model of the cosmos: in the beginning, God created all things through the Word. The astrologer Bartholomeus Mangolt repeated this thought in his preface to his prognostication for 1530: “God, the Heavenly Father, through his immeasurable wisdom, in the beginning created the heavens and everything contained therein by the word.” Mangolt’s colleague Matthias Brotbeihel turned to
the Psalter for a similar idea, noting that David had written “that the heav-
ens were made by the word of the Lord, and all their power (omnis virtus)
by the spirit of his mouth [Psalms 33:6]. From these heavens, the whole of
the earth is made temperate and agreement is made among all the works of
nature, so that the lowest things follow the higher ones in order, and human
works are led, governed, born, and destroyed again in their order by
changes in the higher heavenly things.”48 The stars were both the medium
of God’s influence, and the verbal signs of God’s message. Another contem-
porary astrologer, Michael Krautwadel, called the stars “God’s transla-
tors.”49 What can be spoken can also be written: a Scottish colleague, James
Perillus, whose prognostications were twice translated into German, noted
that God has set the stars in the heavens as a mirror of his power, or has
“bound and written them as an open book, with beautiful shining stars like
golden letters.”50 Italian astrologers, including Giovanni Pontano, also
equated celestial and alphabetical signs, as did Paracelsus.51 A generation
earlier, the idea is already an astrological commonplace. In his prognos-
tication for 1493, Johannes Virdung cited the authority of both the Bible and
Arabic astrologers: “God has written these things that he wants us to know
in the heavens as if it were in a book. Master Albumasar also bears witness
of this when he writes, ‘God has made the heaven like a parchment on
which the forms and fortunes of the lowest things are written.’”52 Other
astrologers saw themselves as both interpreters and proclaimers of hidden
wisdom. Simon Eyssenmann justified the publication of his practica for
1520 by writing in the preface, “Ptolemy also says in the same book that the
fate of the entire world is subject to the heavens, in which is written the en-
tire future of this earth according to the signs and stars; let him read from it
who can. That is, he who knows and has learned the art of astronomy
should proclaim it to the people.”53

A central moment in the Sibyl’s prognostication appears at first as the
mere resolution of an abbreviation, yet it, too, shows the engagement of the
Sibyl’s Prophecy with a particular moment in the spread from scholarly to
vernacular readers of late medieval technologies of information access. One
of the future events foreseen by the Sibyl is a sequence of emperors known
only by their initials: “An A will come and smite another A to death, and if
an H loses his life, he will be forgiven through God’s body; and an L and an
F will war more than seven years for the empire, but the L must be victori-
os.” Solomon asks for an interpretation, and the Sibyl provides one: Al-
brecht (I) will smite Adolf (of Nassau), after which Heinrich (VII) will be
murdered by Dominicans; Frederick (the Fair of Austria) and Ludwig (IV the Bavarian) will battle for the empire, and Ludwig will be victorious. Earlier strophic versions of the poem had predicted Frederick’s victory in 1321 after seven years of battle, but Ludwig was victorious in eight, in 1322. This was established fact at the time the Sibyl’s Prophecy reached its present form, presumably in the 1360s or 1370s. While the letters and their interpretation might change over time, the sequence of kings in letter form was an element of sibylline prophecy from the beginning.

Encoding the names of rulers as letters is a device that continued to be used in both prognostic and prophetic writing into the next century. To name but a few examples, a booklet printed in 1518 that purported to contain prophecies by Joachim of Fiore and Hildegard of Bingen attributes to “the old Joachim” a prophecy concerning menacing black birds, identified by the names A and H. These are then interpreted as “Agareni” and “Hismaelites,” or Turks and Saracens. The same type of acronymic encoding also appears outside of letter prophecies. Johannes Virdung’s judgment on a comet seen in 1531 was that it was an ill omen to five lords: “and therefore,” he wrote, “may an A, H, L and two Fs take care that this comet does not strike them.” Also in the 1530s, Paracelsus invoked the Sibyl’s letter prophecy, although his own mode of prophetic writing is quite distinct. Beneath a woodcut showing a majuscule F resting on a rose that, in turn, sits upon a crown, Paracelsus writes, “Sibylla commemorated you when she said, ‘You, F, stand fittingly with the rose, for you are timely, and time has brought you.’ What Sibylla says about you will come to pass, and still more will be said about you.” Not just for sibylline material but also for other prophetic figures and even for professional astrologers, letters could function as ciphers for hidden knowledge. For Paracelsus, letters themselves were a revelation from God: “Who can discover how letters were invented, except through divine teaching?”

Lurking behind the Sibyl’s alphabetic game is the concept of letters as ordering and indexing elements, which was always a potential use of the fixed alphabetic order but did not come into regular use until the Middle Ages. In the sequence of abbreviated emperors in the Sibyl’s Prophecy, letters stand as indices of the sequence of real events. The Sibyl who can grasp the true significance of a wooden beam, in contrast to the limited understanding of Adam’s son, is an ideal reader who can reveal the full meaning of a mysterious letter sequence. Whether she is reading the word of God recorded in the heavens or interpreting a series of letters, the Sibyl models...
the proper function of literacy as a way to master textual information and to understand the order of the cosmos.

THE CROSS, THE PRESS, AND THE WORD

By incorporating the legendary origin of the Cross in the Tree of Life in paradise, the *Sibyl’s Prophecy* touches on medieval devotion to holy relics, as the True Cross was one of the first and most prominent of Christian relics. The *Sibyl’s Prophecy*, at the beginning of Gutenberg’s career as a printer, was not his first contact with relics in his entrepreneurial life, however. In the late 1430s and early 1440s, Gutenberg was involved in a number of technical commercial ventures in Strasbourg. One of the primary undertakings was a plan to manufacture pilgrims’ mirrors. Since the fourteenth century, many of those making a pilgrimage acquired metal pilgrim badges as signs of a completed pilgrimage that entitled the bearer to the protection and hospitality to which pilgrims were due. The pilgrim badges were also considered to be relics in themselves that were imbued with the aura of holiness from the saints and their shrines, and the badges found use in folk devotion and folk medicine. The fifteenth century saw a further innovation with the addition of a mirror within the decorative metal frame of the pilgrim badge. The development of pilgrims’ mirrors was a response to the growth of pilgrimages into a mass phenomenon, with tens or hundreds of thousands of pilgrims pressing forward into the presence of the displayed relics. The sheer numbers forced pilgrimage sites to display relics on raised platforms or suspended from church walls or steeples, so that pilgrims could only glimpse them from a distance. Late medieval scenes of pilgrimage show members of the crowd raising mirrors above their heads, but not to aid their view. According to Kurt Köster, “The image, the radiance of the displayed relics, caught by the mirror and carried home, was intended to give duration in the sphere of the pilgrim’s daily life to the granting of mercy at the place of pilgrimage, and to let family members and friends participate in this grace.”

Gutenberg and his business associates in Strasbourg appear to have hatched a scheme to produce pilgrim’s mirrors in great quantities for an upcoming display of relics in Aachen (although, by all appearances, they mistook the year of the pilgrimage for 1439 rather than 1440, with unknown consequences). There is no evidence that Gutenberg was experimenting with printing already in Strasbourg or that his pilgrim mirrors were marked with letters or numbers, but Köster identified a number of
ways that the enterprise with the pilgrim’s mirrors might be considered a technical precursor to the printing press, including the replacement of manual labor with a stamping process that may have used a press, experience with metallurgy and the properties of various metals, the division of labor in a process of mass production, the high initial investment required to cover the costs of skilled labor and materials, and the production of an unlimited number of copies from a single original. The equivalence of copies and originals may have been a concept familiar to Gutenberg from his earliest days in Mainz, as he was likely familiar with the trades of gold-smithing, seal making, and coin stamping in Mainz, although there is no indication that he pursued any of these professions seriously.

The precedents for the invention of print in Mainz that can be observed in the pilgrims’ mirror enterprise in Strasbourg include more than purely technical considerations. Hearing the spoken word and experiencing the sanctity of a holy man or woman are both forms of interaction that require immediate and personal presence. Relics preserve a saint’s aura and give it temporal durability, just as manuscripts preserved the spoken word in written form. What Gutenberg began in Strasbourg, however, was very much like the undertaking he brought to fruition in Mainz: with thousands of mass-produced mirrors, Gutenberg and his partners in Strasbourg hoped to make the aura of holiness reproducible, transportable—in a sense, a commercial good. That is just what Gutenberg achieved with respect to the spoken word through his invention of movable type in Mainz. The word became a reproducible, transportable, mass-produced commercial product on an unprecedented scale. It is therefore appropriate—and perhaps no accident—that one of Gutenberg’s earliest works should include at its core the legend of the wood of the Cross, which concerns the originary relic of Christendom.

The next recorded edition of the Sibyl’s Prophecy after Gutenberg’s came around 1473, from Martin Flach in Basel. Six editions from five different German printers followed in 1491–93, including one edited by Jakob Köbel. Editions continued steadily after the turn of the century, with eight editions between 1513 and 1520. Prior to this, in the early 1480s, the Sibyllarum et prophetarum de Christo vaticinia, a set of twelve sibylline prophecies in Latin collected by Philippus de Barberiis along with a variety of other texts, had gone through three editions in Italy. Jodocus Eichmann’s German prose adaptation of these sibylline texts appeared in 1493 but lay dormant after that until 1516, when Jakob Köbel published a new kind of German
Sibyl collection, the *Prophecies of the Twelve Sibyls*. The collection consisted of Eichmann’s German text on the twelve Sibyls as well as a thirteenth sibylline text: a prose text, corresponding to the verse *Sibyl’s Prophecy*, that had previously appeared twice as an independent booklet. The collections of Barberiis had offered not just a set of texts but also a series of woodcut illustrations of the Sibyls, and Köbel built on this example. The *Prophecies of the Twelve Sibyls* published by Köbel juxtaposed each Sibyl’s prophecy and full-page woodcuts based on Italian models with smaller woodcuts of Old Testament prophets and biblical verses. Later editions of the *Prophecies of the Twelve Sibyls* by Christian Egenolff in Frankfurt form the core of more extensive prophetic compilations. While later editions omit the Old Testament prophets, they otherwise follow the pattern Köbel created. Egenolff’s collections of sibylline and other prophetic works appeared in various configurations regularly in the 1530s and again at the end of the 1540s. Yet even then, a century after Gutenberg, the chain of influence from the verse *Sibyl’s Prophecy* through Köbel to Egenolff remains just a few steps.