Printing and Prophecy

Green, Jonathan

Published by University of Michigan Press

Green, Jonathan.
Printing and Prophecy: Prognostication and Media Change 1450-1550.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/11317

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=321534
PROPHETS AND THEIR READERS

SILENCING READERS

The closer relative and nearer antecedent of Johannes Lichtenberger’s Prognosticatio was not any of the monumental editions of Birgitta of Sweden’s collected works but, rather, an early fifteenth-century compilation of revelations known as the Onus mundi, or Burden of the World, which appeared in five printed editions between 1481 and 1522. The compiler, Johannes Tortsch (before 1400–1445), had included selections from additional prophetic authorities, including a Sibyl, Joachim of Fiore, and Hildegard of Bingen, so that Birgitta appeared in the Burden of the World as the preeminent prophetic authority of her time but also as one voice in a prophetic chorus, much as she appeared in the Prognosticatio. In the early 1430s, as Johannes Tortsch was preparing a fourth redaction of the Burden of the World, he added a preface that was soon translated into German and included in all printed editions until 1572 but that is only conceivable in the technological and social context of late medieval manuscript culture.

Tortsch began by giving precise instructions for how the work was to be transmitted.

Any person into whose hands this little book comes should preserve it diligently and make every effort that the things that are written in it should be made known to other people. And whoever has this book should not only lend it to other people, but should also lead people to it
and tell them about it, so that he may receive a greater reward from God in the next life, for it is written: He who preaches me will have eternal life. Any person who wants to have this book copied, which is called the *Burden of the World*, should have it copied in such a size that it will be a small volume separate from other books, in order that it might more easily come to the attention of many people. For if this little book were to be combined with another large book, it would be all but lost and would not become so well known, especially since there are few people who read and diligently search the material of large books.²

Not only did Tortsch expect that readers of his compilation would participate in the production and distribution of additional copies and the proclamation of its contents, but he also believed that readers had an affirmative moral duty to do so. The seventeenth chapter pronounces blessings on each person who “works with good sense and according to his ability to make the prophecies known to the people.”³ The eighteenth chapter equally admonishes both preachers and “all those to whom this revelation comes,” while the nineteenth chapter is addressed specifically to preachers. As God had appointed the prophet Ezekiel both a preacher to and watchman over the Jews, “it follows that a preacher, that is a watchman over the Christian people, who hears these things in his reading is obliged by God to proclaim these things to the same people, for thus speaks Isidore [Sententiae III.8.2]: ‘When we read, God speaks to us.’ And thus when any preacher reads the aforementioned words of Christ, he therefore hears them from Christ. And thus it follows that he is obliged to proclaim those words by the mandate of Christ to the people over whom he is a watchman.”⁴ By Tortsch’s logic, readers of the word via the medium of the manuscript become immediate hearers of the spoken word, and hearers of the word are themselves prophets, with a prophet’s duty to proclaim the word aloud and in writing. Tortsch imagined Birgitta’s revelations spreading along a chain of reader-prophets who are both receivers and broadcasters of her revelations. In a similar fashion, an edition of the *Sibyl’s Prophecy* of the early 1490s placed above the title woodcut four lines of verse that commend the work not to readers who want to know the future but to those who want to *say* the future.⁵

Although Tortsch’s belief that readers should assume a prophet’s dual communicative function was preserved in printed editions of the *Burden of the World* until the late sixteenth century, the idea was very much rooted in the religious, educational, and media context that was already changing in
the fifteenth century. Tortsch, a theologian and university rector in Leipzig, wrote in Latin; the popular German translations came quickly, but from another hand. At a time when literacy still largely implied the ability to read Latin and when schooling was still closely intertwined with ecclesiastical training, Tortsch could assume a close alignment of interests between preachers and the readers for whom he wrote. Moreover, the habits of learned reading, including the jotting of marginal notes and compilation of extracts, were themselves part of book production in a manuscript culture. Tortsch could reasonably believe that his readers would be willing and able to disseminate the *Burden of the World* in both oral and written form.

The printing press, invented not long after Tortsch’s death around 1445, would soon fundamentally alter those assumptions. An author’s reading public no longer primarily comprised those to whom he or she presented a manuscript and others within their close acquaintance; rather, it included an anonymous mass audience who were principally consumers of the written word with little role in the production or transmission of books. The manuscript-reading public of known individuals of a specific social class and educational background was replaced by the dispersed mass audience. Encouraging readers to take action, any action, became subject to more anxiety and official scrutiny.

While the relationship of books and readers from an earlier era could linger in fossilized form long after it had become anachronistic, awareness of a changed state of affairs can already be observed in the fifteenth century. One sees the difference quite clearly in how Lichtenberger’s *Prognosticatio* treats its readers. Over forty years after Tortsch’s death, Lichtenberger’s audience, whether by reading or by hearing, is all but commanded to remain silent. After Lichtenberger establishes his authority based on his long experience, careful reading of prophetic works, and expertise in astrology, he draws a stark contrast between experts and amateurs (in a passage borrowed from a 1472 comet tract attributed to Eberhard Schleusinger): “According to Aristotle, no one is a good judge of things that he does not know. . . . And the ignorant should keep their foolishness hidden instead of flapping their mouths, so that their ignorance is not revealed. And even if they are experienced and learned in many things, yet they are ignorant in the things that are described below, of which they cannot be judges and arbitrators.” Even learned men in other fields are ignorant in the ways of astrology, Lichtenberger states, and the ignorant should keep their mouths shut. The relationship between text and audience in the *Prognosticatio* is, in
contrast to the *Burden of the World*, one where readers are exclusively receivers of the prophetic word who should have no involvement in its dissemination. In the print context of the *Prognosticatio*, instructions on what size and format to use for new copies of the work, such as those provided by Johannes Tortsch, would have been pointless, as most readers had no access to the means of textual mass production. While writing and copying manuscripts remained common for centuries after the invention of print, it was already losing its validity as a form of publication by 1488.

The readers envisioned by Lichtenberger no longer participate in the communal transmission of the prophetic word. The proper effect on wise readers is quiet reflection, according to Lichtenberger, while oral reactions are consistently disdained as jaw-wagging libel or foolish gossip. In this, Lichtenberger differs from contemporary prophetic tracts but is in broad agreement with his astrologer colleagues. An anonymous *Tract against the Turks* that cited Methodius as well as Joachim of Fiore, Hildegard of Bingen, Birgitta of Sweden, and anonymous visions, known in four Latin and one German edition of 1474–86, had regarded prophecy as something given to the simple rather than the wise and by which the mighty would be confounded.7 Joseph Grünpeck also regarded the reception and preaching of divine revelation as the province of the unlearned.8 Contemporary astrologers, however, wished that critics might have their mouths restrained (Wenzel Faber in 1485), plugged (Johannes Virdung in 1525), or sewn shut (Christophorus de Glotz in 1496).9 The alienation of the reader from prophetic speaking is affirmed by a caption that adorned the title page of Heinrich Steiner’s 1525 edition of the *Prognosticatio*, citing 1 Corinthians 2:14: “The natural man perceives nothing of the Spirit of God.”10 Prophecy, by this account, is something for experts.

**SELLING PROPHECY TO THE MASSES:**
**PRINTING THE PROGNOSTICATIO**

The printing press was not always or even primarily a tool of intellectual renaissance. “Far from reflecting a mood of optimism, often attributed to the revival of classical learning, this new technology expressed the deeply felt anxiety of Christian Europe,” including the internal threats represented by Jews and heretics (and, one might add, social unrest) and the external threat of Turkish invasion, as Ronnie Hsia has noted.11 In addition to reflecting the concerns of European society, print itself became a focus of anxiety, as
heretical books could find broad circulation and as error could be perpetuated in many copies. The press also promoted the distribution of theological works in vernacular translation to unlearned readers, with unwelcome consequences. Due to the economics of print, the size of the audience had to be maximized in order to justify the initial investment and increase the potential profit. From the time of Gutenberg onward, the technology of print compelled publishers to expand their distribution beyond the literate elite to include the literate masses, particularly new urban classes including merchants, city officials, and skilled craftsmen. This audience was not yet composed of the reading peasants and milkmaids that so concerned the moralists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but it did represent an expansion of reading and market power compared to earlier generations. Each step taken to adapt literature to the needs and expectations of new readers, including use of the vernacular and inclusion of images, heightened the anxiety over its accessibility and, with that, the dilemma for printers: a booklet every cartwright clamors to read might bring in a nice profit, but rioting was bad for business. Official censorship could be just as ruinous, as Matthias Hupfuff discovered in 1504, when the city council of Strasbourg forbade him from selling six hundred already printed copies of a polemical pamphlet. Rather than banning the book itself, the city council prevented him from recovering his expenses or making any form of profit from the book.

Prophetic and prognostic works represent a distillation of the primal hopes and fears of a society. Their contents, almost by definition, span all that might happen, for good or for ill, from ultimate victory to world-ending disaster. Astrologer Johannes Seger referred in the preface to his practica for 1518 to “much good for which one hopes and evil that one fears, which one might obtain by diligence, or forestall.”

One of the frequently expressed fears is the threat of social disorder. The connection between end-time expectation and concerns about social turmoil was, of course, nothing new. Already Adso’s tenth-century Letter on the Antichrist begins by noting that there are many Antichrists, for anyone who disrupts the social fabric might be regarded as such: “Any layman, cleric, or monk who lives in a way contrary to justice, who attacks the rule of his order of life, and blasphemes the good, he is an Antichrist, a minister of Satan.” In the late fifteenth century, prognostic and prophetic works often warned of social unrest. Leonhard Seybold, for example, argued that the governing influence of Mars with the aid of Mercury in the year 1485 would
result in “recalcitrance of the people against their superiors and vengeance against those whom by all rights they should obey.” The tract *On the End of the World* attributed to Vincent Ferrer and published in German translation together with the *Tract against the Turks* in 1486 foresaw that laymen would become so scornful of the learned that they would presume to do God a favor when they killed them and trampled them underfoot. Predictions of disaster in the form of popular unrest continued in the sixteenth century, including in the tracts on the conjunction of 1524 by Johann Carion and Johannes Virdung. Anton Brelochs’s prognostication based on a comet observed in 1531 warned that the “greater part of the common people will work for unity, but some contentious and rebellious people will now and then attempt many secret attacks and oppose their rulers and be known as seditious, but such scoundrels will receive their reward in the end.”

Popular unrest remained in the standard inventory of future woes in the prophetic tracts attributed to Wilhelm Friess, which appeared in 1557 and later: “Among the common people, a great revolt against the lords will arise. The noblemen will discover the traitors and give them over to the sword and will take from them all their wealth and possessions and grant them no protection and peace.”

Even when prophecy is enlisted in the cause of agitation for political reform, disorder is not treated sympathetically but remains a catastrophe to be avoided. A 1525 edition of the *Extracts of Various Prophecies* is notable for adding concluding remarks that call worldly rulers the true Turks and warn of their fall from power within a few years. Yet even this radical appendix sees the recent Peasants’ War as a violation of the divine social order and regards its brutal suppression as a just punishment for rebellion. The anonymous redactor called for peasants to fulfill their divinely appointed roles as laborers for the sustenance of all. Whether speaking for institutional authority or radical reformers, the prophetic and prognostic works that expressed the hopes and fears of their age regarded social disorder as a fearsome event.

But prophecy in print did not just express anxieties. It was itself the focal point of concerns related to social structure and social disorder. Through print, as Müller observes, the danger of unrest grew exponentially. According to Grünpeck, while prophecies and visions could warn wicked men to abandon their sinful ways and could fortify the devout in their virtue and good works, there are nevertheless those “evil and perverted men who through diabolical inspiration sow many seeds of hate, en-
mity, and violence among the people in the guise of prophecy, bringing a bountiful harvest of sacrilege, deceit, and murder, so that they might confound the entire order of religion” (or, in the German editions, “all human and divine orders”). Lichtenberger’s Prognosticatio itself attests the anxiety over prophecy and social unrest in its description of a future false prophet.

For when the man, wise and fair of speech, reaches the age of discernment, he will carefully consider the celestial motions and then cause commotion among the people. He will exhort the people and deceive them with flowery words, reinforce their feelings and strengthen inclinations and actions by predicting the people’s fortune and misfortune. From this they will take courage among themselves and make pacts and agreements to act according to the nature of the influences. For Aristotle says in De generatione that with similar objects, it is easy to bring one to the other [the Latin translates “passage is easier for those having the tokens”]. Thus when there is commotion among the people, it is easier to impel them when they hear that the influences of the stars and their own wishes are not entirely opposed. At that point one can preach to them, when desires are awakened and the people’s feelings are inflamed. Thus it is when coal has a little spark or fire, one blows upon it long enough until it is entirely burning. Thus will the aforementioned prophet arouse passions, sedition, joy and gladness, and war and other influences of the stars among the people. This man will have such understanding of the stars or inferred knowledge of future events or the likeness of knowledge that he will lead the people with his orations, predictions, and portents and convince them so thoroughly that they will proclaim him to be a prophet. Consequently, new sects will arise, the people will be plagued by unprecedented fear and murmur against political rulers, and a great rebellion will occur in Christendom. If such a calamity could ensue from one man preaching his words to impressionable laymen, what ominous potential must have been seen in the press—which was, after all, no less engaged in bringing privileged knowledge to the literate masses and no less entangled in their fears and aspirations. The astrologer Peter Creutzer, who proclaimed himself a disciple of Lichtenberger, interpreted the appearance of a “comet” in 1527, today understood as an aurora, as a portent of a false prophet with a modern media strategy. “In every region, he will preach as-
tonishing sermons and work wondrous signs with his disciples and publish writings everywhere in the land, not just in one place but in many.”

Popular interest in prophetic and prognostic works represented a ready market that printers could not ignore, but popular interest was a near neighbor of excess enthusiasm. Unease about disruptions to social order radiates from the background of printed prophetic works and sometimes erupts to the surface. As the *Prognosticatio* emphasized, it is a *false* prophet that causes commotion and amplifies seditious feeling through his predictions. The balancing of popular interest against economic considerations and magisterial concerns during the first century after Gutenberg therefore results in a print history of prophetic works that is, despite the instrumentalization of prophecy by all sides in Reformation-era sectarian conflicts, largely the story of the printing press as an agent of the status quo.

In view of the anxieties that the publication of prophetic works might evoke, it is significant that publishers of the *Prognosticatio* north of the Alps, whether in German or in Latin, were, without exception, specialized in the production and distribution of popular, vernacular literature (see table 1). The rise of multiple printers in one city or region and the distribution of books via regional or European trade networks brought increased competition, so that by the time the first editions of Lichtenberger’s *Prognosticatio* appeared at the end of the fifteenth century, successful printers were obliged to specialize in particular market segments and address particular target audiences. The first Latin edition of 1488 and a subsequent German edition were printed by Heinrich Knoblochtzer in Heidelberg. During a period when some three-quarters of all books published in the German language area were Latin works, over half of Knoblochtzer’s considerable output (147 editions) was in German. Only twelve editions are known from Jacob Meydenbach of Mainz, including a Latin and German edition of the *Prognosticatio*, and seven of the remaining ten works are in the vernacular. Bartholomaeus Kistler of Strasbourg, more than 80 percent of whose editions (some forty-eight titles altogether) were German books, printed a German edition of the *Prognosticatio* in 1497 and then two Latin editions in ca. 1500, along with two somewhat condensed German editions in 1500–1501. Other printers who were likewise specialized in the printing of vernacular works soon imitated Kistler’s condensed edition, including one of the earliest works printed by Hans Schobser after his transition from Augsburg to Munich in late 1500. Of the 245 editions attributed to Schobser, all but fourteen are German or bilingual German-Latin works. Another
Strasbourg printer who published an edition based on Kistler’s, Matthias Hupfuff, contends with Schobser for the title of most prolific printer of German-language works of the early sixteenth century. Duntze lists 253 titles for the years 1497–1520. Some 70 percent of this voluminous output is comprised of German works.\(^27\) Despite the much larger market for and far greater production of Latin works at the time, the printers of all eleven *Prognosticatio* editions in Germany between 1488 and 1501 were those who specialized in vernacular works, which comprised a majority of their production in each case. The early *Prognosticatio* printers, even those who printed Latin editions of Lichtenberger’s work, found most of their success in producing and distributing books for readers of German-language literature. With the sole exception of Knoblochtzer’s first editions, all the editions of the *Prognosticatio* appeared quite early after the founding of a press or, in the case of Schobser’s move to Munich, in a period of transition. The printers were, in other words, precisely those who were most acutely aware of changes in late medieval society that represented both an economic opportunity and a cause for unease, and they chose to print the *Prognosticatio* at times that were critical for their economic survival. Later sixteenth-century editions were also published by printers focusing on German-language works, most prominently the five editions from 1525–34 by Heinrich Steiner, the leading publisher of vernacular literature in Augsburg.\(^28\) Apart from three Latin editions printed by Peter Quentel in Cologne in 1526–28, all full editions of the *Prognosticatio* in the sixteenth century are in the vernacular. For Lichtenberger’s *Prognosticatio* as for other prophetic and prognostic works, translation from Latin into German was just one of the steps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Printer and Period of Activity</th>
<th><em>Prognosticatio</em> (first edition)</th>
<th>German Titles</th>
<th>Total Titles</th>
<th>Percentage Vernacular</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heinrich Knoblochtzer (1476–1501)</td>
<td>1488</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob Meydenbach (1490–1495)</td>
<td>1492</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bartholomaeus Kistler (1497–1510)</td>
<td>1497</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hans Schobser (1483–1530)</td>
<td>1501</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthias Hupfuff (1497–1520)</td>
<td>1501</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
in the work’s transition into the realm of vernacular literacy, which often had already begun with the printing of a Latin work by a printer who otherwise specialized in accommodating readers of vernacular literature.

In the context of early modern literacy, German and Latin were neither entirely separate spheres of communication nor merely interchangeable. Contemporary observers understood printing in German as a broadening of the audience beyond Latin literates to include both learned and unlearned, as the preface to the 1502 German edition of Birgitta’s collected revelations notes. But the use of the vernacular also had implications for the intended mode of reading. In prognostic works, German translations retain predictions but often omit the astrological reasoning behind them. In a prognostication for the year 1527, Johannes Capistor described a number of future perils, “as anyone will surely hear or read in this German practica but rather will investigate in my Latin practica, where I have thoroughly proved all the described elements with the noble discipline of astrology.” Johannes Virdung noted in his practica for 1497 that the appearance of lights in the atmosphere may be treated in the same way as comets, “as I have logically demonstrated in the Latin.” The boundaries between Latin and vernacular texts, audiences, and reading practices were dynamic and highly permeable, however. When Georg Tannstetter identified Mercury and Mars as the most influential autumn planets in his prognostication for 1524, he added that one might “find the causes on which this conclusion rests in the Latin astrological judgment, which are omitted here for the sake of brevity.” For some readers of Tannstetter’s German practica, the astrological reasoning found in the Latin volume was considered both relevant and accessible.

**Structuring Society**

The society that Lichtenberger evoked, the society whose disruption the *Prognosticatio* warns against, was the traditional medieval order consisting of three estates. The clergy comprised the religious hierarchy, the nobility formed the political hierarchy, and everyone else was assigned to the subordinate lay peasantry. This tripartite social model never existed in undiluted form, and the growing power of cities, the rise of educated classes outside the clergy, and the accumulation of private wealth outside the nobility made it increasingly anachronistic from the High Middle Ages onward. The three-fold distinction between nobility, clergy, and peasants corresponded not at
all to the circumstances of the free citizens of Nuremberg or other printing centers of the late fifteenth century, who might recognize no lord except the emperor and whose lay piety was coming to assert its own validity.

Despite the anachronism of the medieval tripartite social model, Johannes Lichtenberger embedded it into the textual structure and communicative framework of the *Prognosticatio*. The close of Lichtenberger’s introduction explicitly makes the structure and reception of his prophetic compilation matters of social class.

So that I do not deafen the ears of the readers or become troublesome to their minds, I will divide this book into three parts and further divide the same into other parts if necessary, so that readers comprehend and hearers understand how these lower things in this world are ruled by the higher things. In the first part, in its various sections, I will teach how the little ship of holy St. Peter will suffer in the storms and troubles of this world: “You shall pray on bended knee for all Christian people.” In the second part the Holy Roman Empire is explained and what the condition of the secular authorities will be: “You should protect with an armored fist.” In the third part, which is further subdivided, the condition of the laity is revealed: “You should work so that you maintain the others.” And thus no one is left out.33

The spoken lines refer to a woodcut of Christ ruling over the three estates, where the commands are repeated (see figure 5).34 In the first Latin edition, the woodcut immediately precedes the description of a tripartite social structure, while in the first German edition, the woodcut is found on the opposing page, ensuring simultaneous reception of Lichtenberger’s textual explanation with a visual depiction of a social order instituted and reigned over by Christ. From his throne upon a double rainbow with one foot rested on the globe of Earth, Christ, with arms outstretched, tasks each estate with their function in society. On the right, a group identified by crowns and scepters as nobility and led by the emperor is instructed to protect. On the left, a group of clerics led by a figure in papal garb are instructed to pray. In the foreground, two peasants till the soil. They are rendered somewhat smaller than the clerical and regal figures and at greater distance from the divine throne, and the caption above their heads instructs them to labor. In both word and image, the *Prognosticatio* expects each estate to preserve order in its sphere: the priests by maintaining correct liturgy and living a religious life, the nobility by defending against invasion.
Fig. 5. Christ reigning over the clergy, nobility, and laity in the Prognosticatio. (Courtesy of Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München.)
and ensuring justice, and the peasants by making sure that everyone gets enough to eat.

While the division of society into clergy, nobility, and laity became only more anachronistic in the sixteenth century, adaptations of Lichtenberger’s work continued to incorporate it, make use of it, and affirm the value of social stability. The Extract of Various Prophecies published together with Carion’s Interpretation and Revelation in 1530 by Georg Rhau includes, as its final woodcut, an image of Christ giving the three estates the Latin commands as in the original Lichtenberger edition, with the clerics and rulers equally large and standing well in front of the ruling Christ, while the peasants are much smaller and in the background, perhaps directly beneath or in front of Christ. Above, six lines of verse explicate the image: “You, Pope, Bishop, and your confreres / Should express a heartfelt prayer. / You, Emperor, and all the knights / Protect, make peace with armored might. / You, Farmer, till the land. / God Father demands this of your hand.”

In a preface to a new translation of the Prognosticatio first published in Wittenberg in 1527, Martin Luther suggested a somewhat different tripartite division of social hierarchy as the instruments of divine order, consisting of secular, ecclesiastic, and parental authorities. As in the Prognosticatio, Luther envisioned a scene of divine commission by spoken command. According to Luther, God could rule without the aid of men or angels, “yet he desires to do it through us.” Luther explained,

> And so he appoints fathers or heads of households and says, “Be obedient to father and mother.” And he says to the father, “Beget children and teach them.” He could also maintain worldly rule, keep the peace, and punish the wicked without kings, princes, lords, and judges. But he does not desire that but, rather, delegates the sword [of secular rule] and says, “Punish the wicked, defend the pious, and maintain peace.” For he does the same through us, and we are only his masks behind which he hides himself and does all things in all places, as we Christians well know. In the same way, he himself does everything, teaches, comforts, and disciplines, and yet he externally commends the Word, church office, and service to the apostles, so that they should perform it. And thus he needs us people, both in material and spiritual leadership, to govern the world and all that is in it.

On one level, Luther’s perspective is much different from Lichtenberger’s in that Luther conceives of his readers not as metaphorical serfs but as having
a role in the divine government of the world. Yet, despite the replacement of peasants by parents, the evocation of God appointing a threefold human government over earthly affairs is nearly identical to the scene described in the Prognosticatio. Luther appears to have recognized that Lichtenberger’s prophetic compilation was fundamentally about the nature of society and how higher things rule over lower ones, and he seems to have adapted Lichtenberger’s model of society to his own concept of the family as the new social unit.

Affirmation of the traditional tripartite model of society and anxiety over its disruption are apparent in other printed prophetic works, beginning with the very first, the Sibyl’s Prophecy. God’s instruction to Adam at the expulsion from paradise is, of course, the same as that to Lichtenberger’s peasants: “Adam, go hoe and weed upon the earth!” Eve, for her part, is the archetype of the pregnant women depicted in the Prognosticatio, bearing children in sorrow and woe. At the end of time, the depredations accompanying the Apocalypse are described as perversions of the threefold social order. After the Sibyl foretells the anarchy and moral decay that will plague Christendom, Solomon wants to know why the nobility would allow such a thing. The Sibyl informs him that knights and squires, “who are supposed to be protectors of each land,” will instead promote the interests of evildoers. The clergy will be divided by internal strife; enrich themselves with the cities, castles, and lands that rightfully belong to the nobility; and indulge in hypocritical sin and lustfulness. Agricultural production will decline by a third, and unprecedented famine will ensue.

Editions of Birgitta’s Revelations also preserve the traditional model of society. The 1492 edition illustrates the saint’s prophetic role by presenting her as a mediator of God’s word to nobility, clergy, and all other members of society in an arrangement quite similar to that found in Lichtenberger (see figure 6).

The woodcuts in Grünpeck’s Speculum of 1508 likewise depict the breakdown of society. The woodcut illustrating the first chapter shows a church turned upside down in which three men dressed as laborers pray at an altar or take part in a liturgical procession, while in the foreground outside, a tonsured monk and another cleric plough a field (see figure 7). To their left, two commoners appear to be enjoying the fruits of the clerics’ labor. Later woodcuts depict upheaval as the fraying of social bonds in the face of greed, leading to wanton violence and deception. In a collage of four scenes that opens the fourth chapter, a wise man becomes the target
Fig. 6. Birgitta as mediator of the divine message to clergy, nobility, and laity. (Courtesy of Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München.)
of children’s stone throwing and of a woman’s emptying of a chamber pot onto his head, a monk robs a crippled man of his cloak, two men seal an agreement with a handshake while one stabs the other in the back, and one man appears to be stealing from another who is resting inattentively. The fifth chapter opens with a similar woodcut (also on the title page), in which armed men attack a woman and child, a kneeling bishop, unwary travelers, and each other; behind them, a church collapses in flames.\textsuperscript{40} The eighth chapter accuses the Christian estates of idolatry: the peasants honor Baal in their gluttony; the nobility and civil servants honor many gods in the objects of their greed; the lower clergy worship Cupid, Adonis, and Venus in their lust; and the prelates idolize the sun by relying on their earthly powers and permitting sin within their subjects. A later woodcut shows monks being led from their cloister and battered by a crowned noble and another layman, followed in the next woodcut by a massacre of monks at the hands of turbaned soldiers with scimitars. In the final image, harmony is restored as kneeling laymen and crowned nobility show proper respect to a procession of bishops and monastic figures.\textsuperscript{41} The anonymous compiler of the \textit{Extract of Various Prophecies}, drawn from Grünpeck and Lichtenberger, recognized the social commentary of their works, for the booklet closes with fifty-four lines of verse on the inversion of social order and virtue: “Because all estates choose contradiction / The world is filled with sore affliction.”\textsuperscript{42}

Already in Grünpeck’s 1508 \textit{Speculum}, however, the tripartite social order has undergone changes. Grünpeck treats the higher and lower clergy as two separate estates, for a total of four. Grünpeck represents a step toward a threefold system of binary opposites in terms of religiosity, status, and gender, as can be seen, for example, in Pamphilus Gengenbach’s \textit{Nollhart} of 1517. Nollhart, depicted, as in the \textit{Prognosticatio}, as a bearded robed figure with a staff and rosary, begins by bemoaning the decay of all estates: “Now listen, my dear people, to what I will soon explain to you here concerning the several classes of this world, of which none is truly in proper order: clerical or worldly, knight or servant, and all the female sex as well.”\textsuperscript{43} \textit{The Old and New Brother Nollhart}, revised in and published by the workshop of Jakob Cammerlander three decades later, adds a new opening but finds the erosion of categorical differences in society just as ominous: “Greater and lesser have equal might in the kingdom of sin,” the prophetic narrator declares.\textsuperscript{44}
Fig. 7. Clergy tilling fields while peasants perform the liturgy, from the *Speculum* of Joseph Grünpeck. (Courtesy of Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München.)
From a contemporary perspective, books appear to convey the message of an author to his or her readers. While printers and publishers may alter or even reverse an author’s statements, printers rarely emphasize that the book, as a channel of communication, is anything but transparent. A characteristic of printed prognostic works, however, is the recasting of reading not as hearing the prophet’s voice but as overhearing a conversation between the prophet and the king. Jan-Dirk Müller’s study of Sebastian Brant as poet and prophet finds that Brant’s prognostic broadsides of the 1490s and later decades simulated dialogues in which prophets speak to monarchs while readers remain external witnesses of an event at a royal court from which they remain excluded. Thus distanced from the act of prophecy, the audience does not take part in affairs that concern princes and prelates. But the framing of texts as dialogues between prophets and kings can be found prior to Brant throughout early modern prophecy in print from its beginning, including in Lichtenberger’s Prognosticatio, in his earlier Conjunction of Saturn and Mars, and at the beginning of print itself. The reconfiguration of readers as eavesdroppers is already present in the Sibyl’s Prophecy. The work begins, in the typical manner, as a joint enterprise between narrator and hearers: after retelling the story of the Creation and Fall, the narrator says, “We’ll leave this story here by saying that Adam and Eve spent their lives with all manner of things on Earth. Now listen: Adam began to get old.” The next hundred lines retell the True Cross legend in order to set up the meeting between the Sibyl and King Solomon. At the point when the subject turns from the past to the prophetic future, however, the communicative structure also changes. Rather than continuing as the narrator’s speech addressed to the reader, the Sibyl assumes the role of prophetic narrator, and Solomon steps in as the recipient of her words. On its face, the text is no longer addressed to the reader but, rather, represents the dialogue of a prophet with a monarch, who receives and legitimizes her words. Readers, formerly addressed directly by the text, now become overhearers of the conversation between the two, and their outsider status is maintained until the end of the world. Only at the conclusion, when the text returns from the future to the plane of moral teaching (and, incidentally, at the point that the fragment from Gutenberg’s press begins), do the readers again become the subjects of perception: they are enjoined to
heed God’s judgments, recognize the signs of the times, and learn from scripture. The nature of the *Sibyl’s Prophecy* as a conversation between a prophet and a king to which the reader is permitted access can also be seen in the illustration on the title page of Heinrich Knoblochtzer’s 1492 edition (see figure 2, in chapter 1) and later editions into the late sixteenth century. Rather than depicting future events or devotionally significant scenes, the title woodcut shows the Sibyl and Solomon in conversation beneath a sky with a single star. The star is the source of the Sibyl’s knowledge; as a prophetic figure, she is both the reader who discerns its meaning and the author who transmits its message to the king. In this configuration, the Sibyl is a reader who deciphers signs, while Solomon is the listening audience. People who happen to hold the *Sibyl’s Prophecy* in their hands become outside observers of the communication process.

The earliest known printed work of Johannes Lichtenberger, the *Conjunction of Saturn and Mars* printed around 1475 along with a horoscope concerning the 1474 siege of Neuss, is one of the earliest printed prognostications based on planetary conjunctions and one of the earliest astrological prognostications of any kind in print. As in the *Sibyl’s Prophecy*, the *Conjunction of Saturn and Mars* prominently frames its communication as a personal interaction between the astrologer and the emperor: the title block on the first leaf states that it was “presented by me, Johannes Lichtenberger, by my own hand to the Lord Emperor and the princes in the city of Strasbourg” in 1473, and the text begins with a vocative appeal directly to the emperor. The horoscope also is identified as something personally presented and spoken by Lichtenberger to Frederick III. At a founding moment of astrology in print, readers are presented not with the message of an author directed at them but with the illusion of a stolen glimpse of an astrologer’s audience before the emperor. The text attempts to create a fictive presence, not of the author before the reader, but of the reader gazing onto the astrologer’s presentation to his royal patron.

A similar reformulation of reading as overhearing occurs in Lichtenberger’s *Prognosticatio*. Following the text’s claim to represent society in its totality with no exceptions, the woodcuts of nobles, clergy, and peasants necessarily become images of the work’s readers as well. The woodcuts identify not only what is being discussed but also who is being addressed. The text and its structure reinforce the notion that Lichtenberger is speaking to a particular group in each section, each of which begins with a woodcut reiterating Christ’s injunction to a particular estate. The first two sec-
tions also begin with a simulation of direct discourse. Following the wood-
cut of prelates gathered around a pope reading from a book, the first sec-
tion, concerning ecclesiastic affairs, begins, “May the most holy father who
steers the little ship of St. Peter at this time listen!” The second section, con-
cerning the affairs of the Holy Roman Empire, opens with a woodcut of
Christ directly addressing the emperor and other nobles as equal partners
in conversation, eye to eye and on their same level; the text begins, “O, thou
most unconquerable, it is decreed by nature that whoever would guard his
existence [in German, ‘independence’] should strive to embrace unity.” In
various other passages, Lichtenberger addresses “you wisest of all men un-
der the staff of St. Peter,” “you most worthy prince,” “you God-fearing men
of Trier and wise men of Cologne,” “you young man in the land of the Lily,”
“you illustrious duke” and also “all princes.”

The Prognosticatio was not the only prophetic compilation to commend
a differentiated reception according to the reader’s estate. Nearly a century
later, Adam Walasser prefaced the second edition of his compilation of Bir-
gitta’s Burden of the World, “Bruder Claus,” and other works with the in-
struction that if one wanted to “draw profit and utility from these tracts,
then let everyone take note, whatever estate he belongs to, of what is said to
him and not what is said to another. For if I as a layman would concern my-
self much with the clergy’s defects and failings and ignore what is said to me
and my group, that would be backwards and I would have more injury than
profit from it. Therefore let the clergy take note of their things and worldly
people take note of theirs, and let each industriously fulfill his calling.”

The prelates, noblemen, and peasants who populate the woodcuts of the
Prognosticatio ostensibly represented Lichtenberger’s readers—which is, of
course, pure fiction, to judge by the publication programs of the Prognosti-
catio printers. The woodcuts depict neither ideal nor intended readers but,
rather, fictive readers. One function of fictive readers in literature is to dis-
tance real readers from the text and make them observers rather than direct
participants in dialogue between the author and the audience—for exam-
ple, if an author wishes to criticize his or her readers but only indirectly.
Lichtenberger’s fictive readers serve a different function: rather than help-
ing the actual customers of printers like Knoblochtzer and Kistler identify
themselves with the text, the fictive readers in the Prognosticatio hindered
the real readers from doing so. To the extent that readers did identify with
the text, they had to identify themselves (as nonnoblemen and nonclergy)
with a subservient role in the existing political and ecclesiastic order. The
printers of the Prognosticatio did not seek to turn peasants into readers but, instead, invited readers to imagine themselves as peasants. The alienation of readers from the prophetic text was accomplished in part by asking real readers of the Prognosticatio to accept the fiction that they were not the work’s intended readers but, rather, eavesdroppers allowed to overhear a privileged conversation meant for other ears.

In the woodcuts, the fulfillment of prophecy is reserved for kings and archbishops. Where the end times are inhabited by an Angelic Pope and a Last Emperor, laymen only appear in the woodcut illustrations as they go about their chores. In addition to excluding the laity from participation in the foretold events, the illustrations make prophetic dialogue exclusively an affair of the first two estates. Woodcuts in the Prognosticatio depict both clerics and nobles as receivers of revelation or partners in divine dialogue, but there is no equivalent woodcut for laymen, who appear only as audiences of inspired or diabolical preachers. Unlike the Burden of the World, which envisioned readers assuming a prophetic role in the dissemination of the visionary text, the Prognosticatio foresees no role at all for the lay reader except in passive reception of the prophetic dialogue to accompany an individual and interior participation in the prophetic vision.

Astrological prognostications frequently opened with dedicatory epistles that reinforced the existing political order and invoked a communicative framework where readers are allowed to listen in on the author’s address to a political ruler, similar to the Sibyl’s audience before Solomon and Lichtenberger’s audience before Frederick III. The ultimate roots of the practice may well lie in the activities of court astrologers and in manuscript invocation of the illusion of authorial presence, but the function of the communicative framework in a medium intended for a broad anonymous audience is a very different matter from its parallels or origins in other contexts. Prognostications often refer to information that is reserved for their addressee or frame themselves as something that only the addressee should read. “I will write nothing about the fortunes of your dominion, O most illustrious unconquerable prince, but I will report all things in particular by mouth,” Paul of Middelburg wrote in his practica for 1482. Marcus Schynnagel’s practica for 1491 opens and concludes by addressing Maximilian I directly, and in the conclusion, Schynnagel emphasizes that opposition to astrological predictions among those ignorant of the art, particularly lawyers, compels him not to reveal some things to the common man but instead to send them secretly to Maximilian. This may well corre-
spond to the intentions and actions of Schynnagel, but as part of the presentation of a printed tract, it frames the reading of prognostic works as the interception of privileged communication. Like the Sibyl, reading the stars and reporting their interpretation to the king is precisely how Johannes Virdung presents his various tracts on comets and lunar phenomena. His comet tract of 1531 opens by positioning itself as a reduced version of something meant for the prince, not the common man: “Most illustrious prince, although I had not intended to publish the interpretation of the comet that was seen this year, which I made for your princely grace, yet I am compelled to do so and to bring forth an extract of my interpretation because of many ignorant people who have written falsely about the comet.”

The conceptualization of reading as overhearing the conversation of prophets and kings is perhaps most concretely depicted in Pamphilus Gengenbach’s Nollhart, where the dialogues between various prophetic figures and a series of political and religious leaders (as well as a Turk, a soldier, a representative of the Swiss cantons, and a Jew) literally began as staged performances in Basel. Considering the several print editions, Gengenbach appears to have found an effective dramatic formula in the succession of prophetic dialogues. While the accusations and baleful proclamations delivered to some figures are arguably different from the narrative function of the Sibyl’s audience before Solomon, the audience of the Nollhart drama is even more clearly separated from events on the stage and transformed into observers of the action there. The woodcuts in the printed editions emphasize the dialogic and performative nature of the text by showing, in each case, a confrontation between Nollhart, Birgitta, the Sibyl, or Methodius and their interlocutors. The woodcuts used by Cammerlander in the mid-1540s in his editions of The Old and New Brother Nollhart are rudimentarily executed but based on the same pattern, and Cammerlander used them again as illustrations for a condensed version of Lichtenberger’s Prognosticatio that he printed at the same time along with Virdung’s prognostication for 1524–63, as the Great Practica. In these editions, images originally meant to represent a staged drama reinforce the communicative framework of the Prognosticatio as a series of dialogues between prophets and church prelates, secular rulers, and other figures.

For centuries after Gutenberg, most authors remained financially dependent on their patrons, so that the author’s primary intended audience was often a single powerful individual, and their interaction could often be conducted as effectively in manuscript or by the spoken word. Many
printed books were thus, in the first instance, not messages from authors to readers but messages between the learned and the powerful that printers redirected as commercial wares to their customers. Printers preserved the illusion of a conversation between the author and a noble patron because it helped maintain the existing social order and secure the benevolence of the ruling powers. From the early sixteenth century onward, print publication began to involve a literal political affirmation in the form of printers’ imperial privilege, which promised protection against unauthorized reprinting, and approval by ecclesiastic authorities, so that books directly addressing the literate masses were explicitly condoned by the first and second estates. The depiction of reading as laymen’s overhearing of a conversation between a prophet and a king therefore succinctly expressed the structure of print communication in the first century after its invention. As the astrologers had long insisted, the higher things of this world rule over the lower ones.