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=321538
CONCLUSION:
THE PROPHETIC READER

In the first centuries after Gutenberg, prophecy in its many forms provided a significant segment of the print market, a model of the social and semiotic interactions of authors with their audiences, and a metaphor for literacy and printing itself. The Sibyl’s book is always fragmentary, however. Whether in the remaining volumes saved from destruction by the emperor’s belated purchase in the traditional story, or in the single remaining leaf of Gutenberg’s edition of the *Sibyl’s Prophecy* that is the focus of chapter 1, reading the Sibyl or her prophetic colleagues requires readers to invest incomplete texts with their own imagination. Without it, much of the earliest printed literature must seem like a foolish waste of time.

Seen from a limited perspective, Johannes Lichtenberger must appear, much as Paul of Middelburg charged in his 1492 *Invective*, as a talentless and unscrupulous plagiarist. Those who were influenced by Lichtenberger, including Josef Grünpeck and others examined in chapter 2, appear in an even worse light as deceived imitators. In similar fashion, several important early printers, including many of those examined in chapter 3 who pioneered the publication of popular vernacular works, would seem tarnished by their association with such nonsense. Those who reprinted extracts from Lichtenberger’s *Prognosticatio* into the late sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, long after the time Lichtenberger had foreseen, must seem as utterly naive or disingenuous as those who rewrote and updated me-
dieval prophecies to suit their present moment. The “assumption of false identity, the prediction of events that had already happened, the introduction of meaninglessness, and the resort to plagiarism” are, according to Robert Lerner, the characteristic deceptions of medieval prophecy and the hallmarks of its self-righteous pious frauds.¹ The preceding chapters have certainly found numerous examples during the early modern period as well. The readers of prophetic works in print would therefore seem no better than passive receptors of the prophet’s words and dutiful objects of the prince’s actions as in the asymmetric relationship between prophet, prince, and populace discerned by Jan-Dirk Müller.² To the extent that readers did actively construct the meaning of early modern prophetic works, Ottavia Niccoli sees a “severely distorted, partial reading”: “The recent invention of printing, which threw on the market a mass of texts composed in very different epochs, had suddenly torn texts out of their cultural and historical contexts. . . . Present concerns invaded a text (that was usually deliberately ambiguous), overwhelmed it, and constrained the reader to a noticeably distorted reading of what it contained.”³

We need to “grapple with the minds of the past on their own terms,” however, as Robin Barnes has emphasized. “While we may see strong elements of naiveté in that picture of the world, we risk missing a great deal if we too quickly assume the condescending attitude of the enlightened analyst.”⁴ The strategies employed by printers to confine and dampen readers’ reactions, as described in chapter 3, were never perfectly effective, and visual access to prophecy, as discussed in chapter 4, was a possibility that appealed to many readers. Rather than being only passive receptors, readers could resist the text’s claims, as, for example, the reader who inscribed a warning against “this heretical and false prophet” on the title page of Johannes von Lübeck’s Prognostication of the Advent of the Antichrist and the Messiah of the Jews.⁵ Concerning Wolfgang Aytenger’s interpretation, which saw a final destruction of Turkish power in the prophecies of pseudo-Methodius, one reader twice noted that daily experience taught just the opposite.⁶

Beyond acts of resistance, readers could engage with prophetic texts in mutual acts of creating meaning. The annotations left in many prophetic and prognostic works are evidence of readers who connected the prophet’s message to the world as they observed it. In one copy of Lichtenberger’s Prognosticatio, two different readers saw predictions concerning imperial succession and the rise of a false prophet in Charles V and Hieronymous Savonarola (or a prophet rumored to have arisen in 1508 in Persia or per-
haps, Martin Luther). Plagues predicted for the turn of the sixteenth century found fulfillment, in one reader’s view, in the sudden appearance of syphilis and a swarm of locusts.\(^7\) Even when Lichtenberger was reprinted after four decades and read a century later, readers could still find the predictions timely. The *Prognosticatio* foresaw that a struggle over ecclesiastical power would lead to unbelievable devastation. During the Thirty Years’ War, a reader twice affirmed, “Thus it unfortunately happens now in 162 […] in Germany. Indeed, unfortunately much more this year in 1630.”\(^8\) Readers of practicas, the annual astrological prognostic booklets described in chapter 5, engaged in the same kind of creative engagement. One reader noted in the practica of Petrus Advogarius for 1495, for example, next to the astrologer’s warning that King Alfonso should be particularly careful in the months of October and November, that the king had died in November (when, in fact, Alfonso II of Naples died in December 1495).\(^9\) Confronted with a description of astral influences, the reader chose to interpret the world in a way that was consistent with them, reading not to falsify but to fulfill. Readers’ resistance to editorial control and their willingness to invest their reading with imagination form one reason that the practicas and other booklets addressing the controversial prediction of a second deluge for 1524 failed to have their desired effect, as described in chapter 6. While the authors of most of the pamphlets intended their use of astrology and other prophetic modes of writing to restore equilibrium to a society threatening to come unraveled, prophetic reading could turn a scholarly admonition into a foretelling of imminent doom. In the manuscript media context of the early fifteenth century, Johannes Tortsch had envisioned a prophetic mode of reading that broke down the distinction between author and reader, as both would receive and transmit the divine message. With the invention of print, that model of participation in textual transmission became impossible for most audience members, but the possibility remained for prophetic reading as a creative act of reception that interpreted texts in the same ways as prophetic authorship.

Prophecy, as we have seen, entailed assumptions about texts and time. Rather than merely a prediction of the future, prophecy resituates the present moment in a narrative that includes the past and the future, such as the location of fourteenth-century imperial succession in a narrative that reached from the Creation to the Last Judgment in the *Sibyl’s Prophecy*. The prophet, as the guiding interpreter of a textual community, could place the present moment in a new relationship to a foundational narrative. In a sim-
ilar fashion, prophetic readers could map a vision of the future onto the present moment and find contemporary relevance in the prophet’s rereading of ancient texts. The most shameless prophecy *ex eventu* could become a true foretelling of a distant future when readers found in it a true description of their present circumstances. Prophecy cannot fail; it can only fail to find the right readers.

The same kind of prophetic reading was not limited to consumers of prophetic or prognostic works but can also be found among printers who updated a prophecy’s dates of ostensible relevance or in authors who found contemporary significance in old books. Martin Luther enlisted the possibilities of prophetic reading in the cause of Protestant polemic by rereading the vision of Brother Claus as an antipapal prophecy. Luther wrote that he had once ignored Brother Claus as irrelevant but now recognized in the vision a sign of warning given to the pope. Rather than a glimpse into the future, prophecy more often entails a reinterpretation of the present moment with respect to older texts. As Luther wrote in 1522, it is the “disposition and nature of prophecies that they are first fulfilled and then understood.”

The nature of prophetic reading is evocatively expressed in the culmination of history foreseen in the visions attributed to Wilhelm Friess: “For every person will be filled with virtue, and everyone will have understanding and wisdom like the apostles at the beginning of the Apostolic Church. They will be illuminated by the Spirit of God in Holy Scripture, which had previously long been dark. They will also understand all prophecies and predictions that have been prophesied and foretold by the prophets. There will also be many who will not only understand the prophets but will themselves also proclaim future things by the Holy Spirit.” The right kind of readers, according to Friess, can write the future and reset ecclesiastical history to its moment of origin. By projecting the present day into the text and applying imagination to its images, prophetic reading could collapse distinctions between past and present, text and interpretation, and author and audience.