

Radical Romantic Women

Romantic Women Writers, Revolution, and Prophecy: Rebellious Daughters, 1786-1826. Orianne Smith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 278 pp.

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<1>Romantic era writing has long been identified with prophecy, usually embodied as the rebellious speech of a male prophet. In *Romantic Women Writers, Revolution, and Prophecy*, Orianne Smith revises this story by identifying women writers, both radical and conservative, who understood themselves as prophets in a line of inheritance that went back to Biblical prophets, typological prophecy, and seventeenth-century women writers who participated in the volatile exchanges of the English Civil War on paper as well as on the battlefield. Smith's argument challenges both the claim that Romantic women writers were nurturing mothers of the nation rather than firebrands whose words resisted the nation state, and their omission from recent studies of Romantic prophecy. As studies of the individual writers that Smith considers have also recognized, women writers of the Romantic era insisted on the work of prophecy as their own.

<2> Much of that work was understood to continue the work of biblical prophecy in an age when millenarianism urged that the end of the world was at hand, either in 1800 or shortly after. Women were not by far the only ones to write prophecy from either radical or conservative perspectives. Writing about future events was nearly unavoidable as 1800 approached and few avoided doing so. Yet Smith makes a good case in this book for the nuanced and sustained character of women's prophetic writing, its diversity in form and audience, and its darkening tone after the French Revolution.

<3>Using speech act theory as the methodological anchor for this argument, Smith rehearses the scholarly work that informs hers, in particular J. L. Austin's account of illocutionary performative speech acts that utter or command that something occur, making that occurrence the work of such speech; Judith Butler's acute notice that the performance of gender and subjectivity is a repeated and transforming project; and Angela Esterhammer's analyses of the role of performativity in Romantic discourse. For women writing in an era about politics and the nation when women were not expected to do so, the value of performing identity – that is both making and announcing it – was essential. Eve Sedgwick's analysis of "periperformatives" – statements that hover near the performative but don't quite get there – may also be useful for thinking about the writers Smith considers. Periperformatives suggestively expand the range of performative and illocutionary gestures available when, as Smith shows they did, Romantic

women writers turn from ringing prophecy to a darkened understanding of their prophetic powers. In Smith's chapters on Anne Radcliffe, Anna Barbauld, and Mary Shelley, signs of the periperformative speech act accumulate.

<4>As Smith argues in her introduction, Romantic women writers were largely inspired by the millenaral sensibility that permeated the years before, and after, 1800. Their models were the Old Testament prophets, channeled through the female prophetic tradition of seventeenth-century England. Like their immediate predecessors, Romantic women prophets understood their task as typological, that is, they sought to identify to find in the present moment events that fulfilled biblical prophecy, in particular, Revelations. Many of these writers supposed that their prophetic energies were needed to guide the progress of nations. Smith contends that male prophets were not similarly concerned to intervene in the work of nations and history, yet it would be difficult to find a male Romantic prophet for whom such interventions were not at issue. What is worth emphasizing, however, is the astonishing character of those women writers who took up prophecy as their rightful task. The many Romantic paintings of the Welsh Bard or Prophet that inspired so many Romantic poets make the gendered expectation clear: wild, long, grey hair, a husky male body yelling imprecations and shaking a weapon, on a mountain crag in medieval Wales.

<5>Smith's first chapter productively considers the lineage that informs the performative speech of Romantic women writers. Enthusiasm, as rhetorical passion and as the proclivity of those who prophesy, is the continuous tone of female prophecy. Its verbal magic others either admired or feared. Male writers who feared women as writers typically found them too enthusiastic, their words seeking to enchant audiences, wary or not. Or they found them mad. Smith identifies several seventeenth-century women whose predicted or prophesied outcomes during the English Civil War, and for whom the ability to do so, depended on their sustained study of the Bible. In this sense, as Smith argues, the substrate for Romantic female prophecy was the typological tradition, but now wrought to the specific historical moment of their own time and above all the French Revolution. Enthusiasm is, as the figure of the women prophet in Romantic writing repeatedly demonstrates, a double-edged sword. Was the enthusiastic Joanna Southcott inspired or mad when she claimed to know the future and carry a miraculous child?

<6>Among the most arresting historical figures Smith considers is the Italian improvisatrice Corilla, who became the model for Germaine de Stael's tragic heroine Corinne and attracted a number of English admirers, among them Hester Lynch Piozzi, who modeled her own writing voice on Corilla's blend of enthusiasm, passionate expression, political engagement, and the performance of female gender. Corilla was not so much a prophet for the age as a performer whose public stature offered women writers a vision of what they might become: inspired, passionate, and political. Although Piozzi denied that her own writing was political in design, she and other English writers who watched Corilla and other improvisers recognized that their impassioned oratory was understood to have political effects.

<7>In her chapter on Helen Maria Williams writing as eyewitness chronicler of the French Revolution, Smith argues that Williams came to understand her role as more than reportage. When Williams acted the part of a female Liberty in the revolutionary Festival of the Federation,

she found in that moment what Smith identifies as the utopian project of her writing: to perform the Revolution and to recognize in that performance the political sway of the sentimental, female figure, her own and those of the women whose histories she narrates. Thus Williams's various accounts of suffering, weeping women in the toils of the Revolution recall for Smith the *Imitatio Christi* topos of the sufferer whose distress and capacity for feeling predict the gentler future that awaits after the horrors of the Terror.

<8>The most arresting chapter of this study is that on Ann Radcliffe's fiction. In these gothic novels, Smith notes, the heroine's and occasionally the hero's repeated encounters with mysterious and typically malign circumstances and persons constitute a performative series that collectively forge identity. So adjudicated, Radcliffe's heroines suffer too much enthusiasm, more than a little abuse, and yet emerge as tempered beings who take possession of themselves and usually a substantial fortune once denied them. Such heroines nudge the *Imitatio Christi* motif toward *Bildungsroman*, by experiencing the world not as an Enlightenment terrain for experimental proof but as one in which mysterious, perhaps supernatural elements chasten their being. Here, Smith suggests, the earlier and at times derisive identification of enthusiasm and magic with women returns in another key. Now these school the heroine's soul, where they remain, in tempered form. Radcliffe's achievement, argues Smith, is to incorporate rather than expunge these female susceptibilities as the performative vehicles for forging female identity. Smith argues further that those novels in which the gothic heroine survives to inherit property stolen from her by others is inherently political in its rejection of the gothic male authorities who would have or for a time bar such access. For Radcliffe, prophecy is implicit in the outcome of her fiction, as the heroine once cast aside and abused takes her place in culture on her own spiritual and often economic recognizance.

<9>Anna Barbauld is, as Smith emphasizes in her chapter on this poet and essayist, a prophetic writer in the strongest Dissenter tradition. Trained to think critically and polemically, she writes poems and prose jeremiads – those lengthy laments about the state of a society and its morals – against the British desire for victory against France, against British imperial pride. Clearly Barbauld writes prophecy, but at key moments she either lets prophecy go or blends it with the jeremiad gestures that readers find in her poem *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812). Smith argues that the role of sympathy in the social contract which animates Barbauld's prophetic voice arises largely from the writings of Adam Smith and David Hume. It is likely that the Dissenting tradition that Barbauld knew so well is another source for the voice she adopts, as the one crying in the wilderness who harangues her British compatriots from an imagined pulpit, even as women preachers of an earlier moment took to real pulpits. Her use of thoroughly illocutionary performatives in several prose sermons echoes the strong, alienated persona of so many Dissenters in England, from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries.

<10>Smith's last chapter presents Mary Shelley as a writer for whom prophecy becomes the vehicle for a darkening vision of history and futurity. For Smith, that darkening pivots on the way female characters are excised from the fictional stage until *The Last Man* (1826), where women hardly make it onto that stage and never take center stage. Shelley's stance might be that of a suppressed, enraged jeremiad against the fools (males all) who exclude women from political power. Readers of this Shelley might account for the demise of Shelley's women

differently. Just here, Sedgwick's peripformative seems helpful because it points to speech and gesture that do not command or predict a future but rather evacuate it. Smith's epilogue argues that this outcome signals both the end of Romanticism and the travails of our present time, when American "individualism, capitalism, and consumerism" (221) constitute another end game. Whatever readers decide about where we are now, Smith's *Romantic Women Writers, Revolution, and Prophecy* provides an important analysis of how Romantic women wrote on topics and in ways that surprised and often annoyed their critics.