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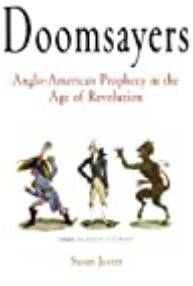
Susan Juster. *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. xi + 276 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3732-0.



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Medium and Message among Revolutionary Age Prophets

England and America swarmed with self-proclaimed prophets from 1765 to 1815. This colorful cast included everyone from Noah White, a simple farmer in Massachusetts and hesitant author of a rambling collection of visionary thoughts, to Joanna Southcott, the famed London prophetess who at sixty-five declared she was pregnant, possibly with the son of God. *In Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution*, Juster explores the common threads between these diverse characters, linking them to larger social and cultural trends, especially the expansion of an increasingly democratic and print-oriented public sphere. White, Southcott, and most of the other "prophets", actively though sometimes uncertainly, circulated ideas to a large and anonymous public primarily through the medium of print, "selling both terror and reassurance to eager buyers" (p. 8). But these prophets did not promote political militancy, if they shared a message it was primarily that they had a right to prophesy in the new marketplaces of the revolutionary world.

In this eloquent effort to locate "the place of millenarian thinking" in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Anglo context, Juster distinguishes revolutionary prophets from the earlier radical spiritists of the English Civil War and the later populist eclectic millennial proponents of the Victorian age (p. 5). Juster proposes that revolutionary visionaries "did not mount systemic attacks on the economic and political structures that sustained the church-state nexus" (p. 7). Instead, their primary objective was "spiritual reform, of a very personal and private kind" (p. 7). In doing so, they "transformed the sacred theater of the 1640s into something of a national culture" (p. 7). Some of Juster's doomsayers (mostly men) made democratic principles explicit; others (mostly women) thought that a confused message was the best way to achieve their visionary goals. Although attentive to differences between Britain and the United States, in general, Juster treats Anglo-America as one cohesive culture. She argues that it is possible to speak of the "prophets (white Protestant ones, at least) as inhabiting a transatlantic world defined more by a shared cultural sensibility than political unity" (p. 9). Unlike Mechal Sobel's equally interesting work, *Teach Me Dreams* (2000), on dreamers during the Age of Revolution, neither race nor colonialism play a major role in

Juster's theater.

The first part of the book sets the stage for her prophets. Juster makes a forceful argument that historians have oversimplified the Enlightenment. Instead she suggests that the Age of Reason was a time of oxymorons when prophets (and others) tried to make sense of religious beliefs in light of new rational philosophies. Both the prophets and the larger public developed a "discourse of authenticity" to examine whether visionaries were "true" or "false." Claims to truthfulness rested on a prophet's abilities to avoid extremes: unlike earlier or later visionaries they were less likely to claim direct revelation and interpret the Bible wildly; they were more likely to keep a clear head and exhibit modesty. For the most part, people who prophesied did not stray too far from the "prevailing assumptions of public discourse." Juster is most interested in those people who no longer credited God with direct responsibility for their words and actions, or at least did so in a more indirect way that distinguished them from earlier prophets. She breaks these revolutionary visionaries down into two groups. The "millenarian prophets" gathered followers as they attempted to bridge the "paradox at the heart of millenarianism: the collision of the ordinary and the extraordinary" (p. 84). The more educated and all male "millennial authors" used print culture to convey prophetic ideas founded on the principles of reason. And due to the general prevalence of rationalism even millenarian prophecy became increasingly closed to prophetesses.

The middle of the book focuses on the gendered ways in which millenarian authors obtained and delivered their prophecies. One chapter, "Body and Soul," suggests that there was a "shifting dialectic between body and language" (p. 101). Instead of the porous unbounded body that enabled God to fill medieval saints like empty containers, the human body had become a clogged vessel to be endured, overcome, or ignored. However, women could and did still draw on the older models. Another chapter, "Millenarian Politics," argues that male prophets were able to carve out a middle ground between the secular republican politics and the mysteries of faith, and thus welded together the language of democratic politics to their distinctive religious beliefs. Critics accused prophets of demagoguery; and although (or because) male prophecies were dressed in political symbols, they lost their militancy and became "safely contained in the world of print" (p. 142). The less literate women, by contrast, had not fully converted to the new semiotic universe. These "mystagogues" were more likely to treat texts as sacred objects, write in mysterious ways, or eschew writing altogether. In general neither men nor women engaged directly in political partisanship, still, both attempted to navigate the changing public sphere in order to enact their "visionary republics."

The book closes with detailed portraits of Richard Brothers, Nimrod Hughes, Jemima Wilkinson, and Joanna Southcott. Whereas the men were viewed as seductive and lying "rogues," English and American publics subjected the "women of revelation" to bodily scrutiny. In addition, Wilkinson's penchant for male clothes and Southcott's unrealized pregnancy turned them into "cultural hermaphrodites," allowing "them to float indeterminately while critics scurried to find the best way to attack and discredit their visionary claims" (p. 215). Throughout the book, Juster pays great attention to nuance and paradox as she describes this fascinating cast of characters competing to shape the public sphere. This excellent study will entrance both scholars and students, and the work clearly supports Juster's contention that "Revolutionary-era prophecy deserves its own chapter in our histories of Anglo-American religion" (p. 17).

But before we complete the larger picture of Revolutionary-age prophecy historians will have to find ways to integrate Juster's findings about the centrality of print culture with other work in this dynamic and burgeoning field. In contrast to Juster, the studies of Nathan Hatch and Ruth Bloch (among others) suggest that prophecy was at the very core of American politics. Many scholars (including Juster) have also noted that this was a time of changing sensibilities in which hearing and feeling worked alongside writing and reason. Among the early Republic Quakers that I have studied several modes of thought (revelation, reason, and romance) were all woven into a prophetic tradition that was readily available to both men and women at meetings and in writing. One way to synthesize all this material may be to suggest that the Revolutionary Age experienced a fragmentation of the prophetic tradition into multiple streams. The introduction of a democratic (if less radical) print culture that is central to Juster's work was clearly significant. But there may have been even more mediums and messages. This approach to the "epistemology of prophecy" would also make room for the incorporation of Native American and African prophetic outpourings during this important moment. In any case, Doomsayers will certainly remain a classic in early American studies, and anyone who is interested in American culture or prophetic traditions will enjoy reading this engaging and important book.

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