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# Considering Eighteenth-Century Prophecy as Transformative Work

**Abstract:** This article explores prophecy in the eighteenth and nineteenth century as a form of transformative work with connections to contemporary fan fiction. This link is established in three ways: through the archontic nature of prophecy, through the prophet's self-insertion into the biblical text, and by viewing prophetic groups as textual communities marked by affective links to characters. These links are examined through a case study of two prophets, Richard Brothers (1757-1824) and Joanna Southcott (1750-1814), with the conflict between them reconceptualised as an affectively driven dispute over claims to character ownership. The article suggests that approaches from fan studies can offer useful perspectives for historians (and vice-versa), while cautioning against overly arbitrary ahistorical comparisons between modern fandom and premodern groups.

**Keywords:** Prophecy, Fan Fiction, Affect, Eighteenth Century, Character

[1.1] The aim of this article is to explore the way in which prophecy in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, an emerging media age, can be viewed as a form of transformative work with analogies to fan fiction. This approach has a number of advantages. Employing methodologies drawn from contemporary fan studies can help historians to shed new light on the nature of debates on prophecy in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. As well as further examining the extent to which prophecy was an attempt by those shut out of the public sphere to articulate their concerns, it offers new perspectives on the way in which those who produced and received prophecies engaged creatively with the Bible, and particularly how they understood the characters contained within. Rather than viewing prophecy as simply a

way of articulating social or theological concerns, controversies between different prophetic groups can be reinterpreted as affectively driven disputes about character usage and ownership, an approach that helps to articulate why these groups felt so passionately about their interpretations. This also places prophecy, particularly within the later-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, within the context of an emerging media ecology marked by patterns of collecting, textual productivity, and a nascent celebrity culture. For those working in fan studies, the examination of prophecy through this lens helps articulate ‘fannish’ practices that existed prior to the twentieth century. Highlighting historical disputes that circulated around character in affective communities provides helpful comparisons that illustrate unique elements of contemporary fandom, and which practices and disputes have longer-term historical antecedents. It situates fan fiction as part of a historical tradition of textual reclamation, particularly by women in patriarchal societies. Examining the way in which male writers, even when also members of subaltern groups, fought against these practices, provides insight and context to contemporary discussions of toxic masculinity within fan cultures (Salter and Blodgett 2017).

[1.2] While this article will touch on a variety of prophets, it will concentrate particularly on the historical controversy surrounding two major prophetic figures in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcott. It will trace the ways in which prophecy might be considered a form of transformative work through their writings, interactions with political and religious authorities, and with one another. In doing so, it traces the way in which the Bible, as the most widely circulated text in the period, acted as a nexus for the formation of imaginative communities.

## **2. Fan Fiction in Historical Context**

[2.1] Studies of fan fiction have often pointed to historical precedents to contemporary fan practices, particularly to the way in which characters from ancient myth and medieval romance were transferred into new narrative contexts (e.g. Pugh 2005, 13-15; Jamison 2013, 26-36; Keller 2011, Simonova 2012). Recent work has emphasised the way in which readers in early modern Europe reworked and expanded canonical texts such as Virgilian epics (Basu 2016), how medieval women writers reworked the romance tradition to express their gender (Nielsen 2017), and the way in which manuscript culture allowed women to engage in textual productivity (Coker 2017). While each of these examples are carefully argued with awareness of the importance of historical context, comparison between contemporary and historical rewriting practices can sometimes be overly arbitrary, employing what Simonova describes as ‘a very generalising view of literary history’ (Simonova 2015, 2). There remains an additional danger that historians might search for apparent antecedents to contemporary fan practices as a way of justifying the existence of fan studies to more established disciplines. Simple comparisons between contemporary fan fiction and historical practices, then, risk both losing the historical context of the historical works examined, and effacing genuinely new practices in contemporary fandom.

[2.2] Rather than simply search for comparisons between modern fandom and historical practices, a further step is needed. Recent studies have suggested that this should involve an emphasis on affective reading, community formation, and the links that readers developed with characters. These emphases provide the historian tools drawn from fan studies that might offer new ways of understanding historical communities and reading practices. Writing about the ancient context, Shannon K. Farley has noted that there is more to fan fiction than simply transferring existing characters across narratives. She emphasises that the importance of community and the affective responses of fans set modern fan works apart from re-written texts such as the *Aeneid* and its reuse of Homer’s characters (Farley 2016, 3.9). Anna Wilson

has recently called for an emphasis on the ‘loving reader’ in the study of precursors to modern fan fiction, highlighting the importance of ‘a shared affective’ community receiving and continuing to rewrite texts (Wilson 2016, 1.1-1.3).

[2.3] Prophecy therefore offers an ideal case study of this connection. Although often popularly referred to predictions of the future, prophecy is a broader phenomenon that can be traced back to the ancient world. At its most basic level, prophecy refers to an individual offering an inspired utterance, acting as a conduit for a message from a deity, or deities. In the Christian tradition this was often expressed orally, and could include forms as benign as a popular sermon, or as potentially disturbing as speaking in an ecstatic trance. Prophecy could also be embodied – as, for example, when Quaker prophets in the mid-seventeenth century interrupted church services naked to serve as a sign of their moral innocence (Author 2016, 4-5). While this suggests that prophecy was spontaneous and ephemeral, from the sixteenth century onwards it increasingly circulated in manuscript and print, as evidenced by the Tudor legislation against subversive political prophecy passed in 1541-42, 1549-1550 and 1563 (Thornton 2006, 14-52). By the seventeenth century, prophecy was primarily a textual phenomenon, whether printed, in manuscript, or in epistolary form. Increasingly, as the early modern period wore on, print became its most common form (Bouldin 2015, 6-9).

[2.4] Although prophecy was (for the prophet, at least) an inspired utterance, a large part of it included elements of engagement with and exegesis of sacred texts – in the Christian context, the Bible. The scriptures offered prophets a way to justify their activity. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and those of the New Testament, such as John the Baptist, provided a model for prophetic activity. Prophets were expected to speak in a biblical idiom and, at times, to mirror the role of their scriptural predecessors. In this sense, prophecy encouraged a sort of role-playing, in which the prophet could consciously imitate historical events from scripture in the present. This was often politically provocative. After

the Quaker James Nayler attempted to recreate Christ's triumphal entry to Jerusalem as he entered Bristol in October 1656, he was tried for blasphemy and came close to being executed. Less politically scandalous, but potentially just as controversial, prophecy usually involved a reinterpretation of scripture that often found ways to use the text to criticise prevailing social and cultural norms.

[2.5] This was particularly the case for female prophets. The Bible contained predictions that prophecy would return to God's people in the end times. God promised that he would 'pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions' (Joel 2:28). The universality of this promise, which spoke particularly about female involvement, also opened up a space for women to engage in broader social, political, and religious discourse. Although the majority of Christian traditions have historically disapproved of women's preaching, the promise that women could prophesy under God's spirit allowed them to become participants in religious debates. As Elizabeth Bouldin noted, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries 'prophecy was a vehicle that allowed women to be heard, to challenge authority, and to stake a claim' (Bouldin 2015, 11).

[2.6] Much of the academic study of prophecy in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries has focused upon the way in which women used it as a means of self-expression and of displaying political and social agency. In the 1640s and 50s, for example, Quaker women prophets preached openly. Prophets like Elizabeth Poole were consulted by Oliver Cromwell and the English Council of State, while Lady Eleanor Davis continued to publish copious volumes of prophecy even during her imprisonment for political sedition. Prophets tended to gather interpretative communities around them, each evidencing a shared approach to the biblical text. These could constitute a physical community, or a wider network of national or transnational readers. Ann Bathurst, for example, kept a diary of her prophecies and dreams from 1679-1696, and circulated them within her Philadelphian community in London. The

Philadelphians' most famous prophet, Jane Lead (1624-1704), kept a similar journal but published it along with other prophecies. This allowed the wide dissemination of her work and attracted readers who corresponded from Germany, France and America (Hessayon 2016).

[2.7] Whether their communities of readers were local or international, they came together around a shared appreciation of the Bible, and the value of a prophet's interpretations of it. These readings were often resistive, and found space for women or disenfranchised men to find themselves in the biblical text. Their prophecies found them inhabiting the roles of Old Testament prophets, or speaking to angels, biblical characters, God, and even Satan. This is where viewing prophecy through the lens of fan fiction can be particularly helpful. Much of the scholarship on fan fiction has emphasised the way in which it has offered marginalised groups, especially women, opportunities to express themselves through exploring gaps in narratives and reimagining characters (Jenkins 2013 [1992]). Examinations of historical antecedents of fan fiction have also often noted the way in which these reimaginings could 'reclaim' traditions and texts for marginalised groups, as E.J. Nielsen does in her examination of Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* as a reworking of the medieval exemplary tradition in order to favour women (Nielsen 2017). Contemporary fan communities are additionally marked by 'loving intimacy' with their texts that makes their consumption 'an example of affective reception' (Wilson 2016, 1.1, 1.2). A combination of the appropriation and reworking of characters, and a reclamatory reading of a beloved text – in this case, the Bible – by a dedicated community, offers a point of contact between fan fiction and early modern prophecy.

[2.8] As noted above, it is important to guard against what has at times been a somewhat arbitrary comparison between modern fandom and historical practice (e.g. Keller 2011).

While fan fiction and historical prophecy may share features, there are a number of apparent

problems with any direct comparison. First, fan fiction is often associated with an intentional reworking and appropriation of a source text (e.g. Jenkins 2013 [1992]), reshaped by an author's agency in a 'purposeful' manner (De Kosnik 2016, 277). Prophecy as a spontaneous (and sometimes unwanted) inspired utterance might appear to attribute all authorship to God, rather than the prophet themselves. It could therefore seem to downplay the agency and individuality of the prophet as the origin of their reworking of the Bible. However, as Carme Font noted, the prophet's individuality was a key part in the transmission of a prophecy. The prophet's individual attributes (such as bodily weakness, personality, or social position) all contributed to the nature of their message. As Susan Juster has argued, by the late eighteenth century, prophets tended to view themselves as God's spokespeople rather than channels of a directly ventriloquized message (Juster 2003, 122). This allowed them to use prophecy as a way of creatively exploring the Bible and its characters. Especially for female prophets, a disclaiming of agency for their compositions was used to justify reinterpretations of the Bible that, paradoxically, granted them the right to reinterpret it. In this way, prophets were able to work as 'co-creators' who could 'gradually blur God's unambiguous presence to keep themselves and the word [of God] in the text.' (Font 2017, 4). The text became what Font has described as a 'textual laboratory' for engaging in new forms of literary work (Font 2017, 221).

[2.9] Another reason why prophecy might initially seem to offer an unpromising comparison with fan fiction is its link to eschatology. Most prophets made extensive use of the Bible's apocalyptic books – particularly Daniel and Revelation – in order to proclaim a coming judgement and overturning of unjust social structures (Author 2016). These texts might appear tied to rigid predetermination, offering tightly prescribed endings and few spaces for narrative exploration. For example, the book of Revelation concludes with a warning that those who either added or removed any element of it would experience eternal punishment.



However, although apocalyptic texts are often connected with clearly defined endings (e.g. Kermode 1967), it is also possible to read apocalyptic works such as Revelation as consistently differing their own endings. As Derrida noted, where readers search for endings and a definitive coming of Christ, they find delays and postponements that open the text (Derrida 1984). The supposed certainty of Christ's return is mingled with deferments and cries of 'How long, Sovereign Lord?' (Rev. 6:10), while the book closes with the author continuing to implore Christ to 'come' (Rev. 22:20). This explains the ever-expanding range of interpretations that circulate around it, as the text itself encourages new engagements, interpretations and reworkings. In this sense, Revelation encourages textual productivity, as each interpretation of the text builds on those previous to it. As a text that placed readers on a boundary between the delivery of the promises and their fulfilment, it in fact comes close to what Paul Booth identified as the key appeal of the cult text, existing 'inbetween answer and question, in between desire and fulfilment' (Booth 2010, 95). This openness of apocalyptic prophecy to reworking is clear from the reaction of prophets to failed predictions. Prophets have not generally abandoned their interpretation when their predictions failed – instead, they have developed new readings that built on their previous work (Dawson 2011). These could be either resistive or supportive of the status quo. For example, in the late eighteenth century, heated interpretive disputes saw non-conformist writers assign Satanic roles in Revelation to Britain and angelic figures to revolutionary France, while Anglican commentators responded by flipping their identification (e.g. contrast Bicheno 1797 and Faber 1806). In this way, prophecy shared what Abigail De Kosnik has described as the archontic nature of fan fiction: each new interpretation of the text became a resource that could be built upon, thereby encouraging ever-greater productivity and reinterpretation (De Kosnik 2016; Derecho 2006).

[2.10] This archontic nature of prophecy is the first feature that prophecy shares with fan fiction. The second is an element of self-insertion within texts. Studies of fan fiction have

often commented upon the (much-maligned) process of author self-insertion through the use of a 'Mary Sue' character (e.g. Jenkins 2013 [1992], Pfeleiger 2001). As Kristina Busse has recently noted, self-insertion reflects an affective connection with the text, while walking a tightrope between a desire to enter a textual world and the perceived extravagances of the Mary Sue (Busse 2016, 162). Similarly, prophets not only interpreted the biblical text, but often found themselves referred to within it. This could be through their appropriation of the persona of a particular biblical prophet. For example, the prophet might shape their writing to mimic the biblical speeches of Isaiah or Moses, an inherently transformative action for women prophets. This was particularly popular among Quaker prophets in the seventeenth century. For example, Margaret Brewster appeared in sackcloth and ashes in Boston in 1677 to replicate the actions of the biblical prophet Jonah in his preaching to Nineveh. Although Bouldin has argued that this action was a minimization of gender (Bouldin 2016, 62-67), the transposition of a male prophet's language to women unavoidably made a gendered statement (Purkiss 1992, 141-3). At other times, prophets might identify with a particular scriptural character, picturing themselves reliving the experiences of the Apostle Paul or John the Baptist. As medieval mystics such as Margery Kempe imagined that they were personally experiencing the suffering of the Virgin Mary in their imaginative meditation, so prophets found themselves re-living scripture. For example, Jane Lead believed that she re-experienced Mary Magdalene's discovery of the risen Jesus at the tomb (Font 2017, 178). Her fellow Philadelphian prophet Ann Bathurst recorded a remarkable vision in which biblical figures including Amos, Job, Malachi and Nahum conversed with her. The assembled prophets presented Bathurst with English monarch Mary Tudor, whose reign was infamous for the religious persecution of Protestants, in order for the prophet to learn how to pray for violent rulers (Bouldin 2015, 115). As Wilson has recently argued, these sorts of experiences can be seen as a type of self-insert fan fiction in which the prophet enters the text and engages

with its characters (Wilson 2017, 2.1). In turn, these relate to a final type of self-insertion – where the prophet themselves fully identified as a character from the Biblical text. The book of Revelation, with its complex symbolism and imagery, provided the perfect repository for these images. To use one particularly popular example, several female prophets (including Jane Lead and Joanna Southcott) claimed to be the ‘woman clothed in the sun’ described in Revelation 12.

[2.11] The final area in which prophecy and fan fiction can be compared is through the importance of affective textual communities, formed around both the prophet’s writings and biblical texts. These could be physical, as with the Philadelphians who were centred in a London community (Hessayon 2016), or textual, as with the Quaker prophets who shared prophecies across continents through letter-writing networks (Bouldin 2015, 52-61). In these communities, the prophet acted as a living-link to the biblical tradition. Supposedly inspired by the same Spirit who had produced the original scriptural texts, the prophet was accessible both as a figure to provide guidance and as an expert exegete with a powerful (and often transformative) engagement with the Bible. As in fan fiction, whereas the canonical author is inaccessible: ‘the writer --- that actively scribbling, embodied woman – is very much alive. You can talk to her; you can write to her and ask her questions about her work, and she will probably write back to you and answer them’ (Pugh 2005, 242). In the same way, the prophet was open to engagement and debate. The accessibility of the prophet developed through technological changes from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. As Susan Juster noted, the emergence of a broader public sphere of print in the eighteenth century allowed prophets to reach a wider audience, and to produce work in direct response to challenges and questions (Juster 2003). Similarly, the prophet could act as a direct connection between the community and particular biblical characters, offering their followers the opportunity for a more direct and embodied experience of beloved scriptural figures through their link to the divine.

[2.12] This affective, communal link to character can help explain the intensity of disputes between prophets and their opponents. In examining contemporary fandom, Rebecca Williams has argued that a fan's ontological security and attachment to a fan object can be undermined when producers make controversial changes to beloved characters (Williams 2015, 45-56). For example, the furious response of some *Star Wars* fans to the portrayal of Luke Skywalker in *The Last Jedi* (2017) demonstrates precisely this kind of reaction (McCreesh 2017). Thinking about links between ontological security and character serves as a helpful way of thinking about the importance of characters for prophets and their followers. Given that prophetic believers' ontological security rested on scripture and claims of divine approval, arguments that their community misappropriated the Bible or misused its characters were particularly powerful. Disputes between prophetic communities therefore rested not only on precise (and sometimes abstract) theology, but also on arguments about who had the right to make claims on these characters. Defences based on identifying with particular biblical figures were therefore vital, as they protected the community's sense of ontological security.

[2.13] These three areas offer helpful parallels between fan fiction and prophecy. Although it would be possible to examine these connections across a variety of contexts, the remainder of this article focuses on late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century prophecy as a case study. The eighteenth century was an important time for the development of transformative works. The rise of the novel as a form of popular recreation led to a surge of popular interest in narratives and characters. Most famously, Samuel Richardson's 1740 novel *Pamela* generated a series of unofficial sequels, parodies and rewrites from readers. Merchandise surrounding the novel included unofficial illustrations in pirated copies, hand fans, and porcelain figurines (Keymer and Sabor 2005). As David Brewer has argued, readers in the period formed strong affective bonds with characters, writing their own continuations,

sequels and resolutions to plots that dissatisfied them. In particular, characters were viewed as a shared, community resource (Brewer 2005). Textual productivity and the assumed right to authorship troubled some religious and political conservatives. The religious writer and bluestocking Hannah More criticised the novel as producing an out-of-control form of textual productivity: ‘every raw girl, while she reads, is tempted to fancy she can write’ (More 1799, 184). Elizabeth Judge, in tracing both this form of productivity and the emergence of copyright law, has therefore seen the eighteenth century as central to the emergence of fan fiction (Judge 2009). As Orienne Smith has suggested, the tradition of female prophecy influenced novels written by women writers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as they used its structures and precedents to justify their intervention into the public sphere (Smith 2013).

[2.14] Brewer argued that the more-widely a text was disseminated, the greater the likelihood that its characters came to be seen as community property, free to move between texts (Brewer 2005, 10-15). Given the Bible’s position as the most widely circulated text in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it would appear to be a prime candidate for the formation of imaginative textual communities. These literary developments and links to prophecy make the period ideal for a case study of the way in which insights drawn from the study of fan fiction can help historians to understand prophecy. The following sections will show how two controversial prophets, Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcott, wrote transformative works based on the Bible. Both responded, in letter and print, to the Bible, each other, and different prophets writing in their communities. Both inserted themselves into scripture, and formed affective communities around them. Using fan fiction studies as a lens to view their work offers new insights into the nature of their disagreements, and the way in which their followers responded to their competing claims.

### **3. Richard Brothers, Joanna Southcott and Archontic Prophecy**

[3.1] Richard Brothers (1757-1824) was a former British naval lieutenant who experienced visions from 1791 onwards. In the early years of the decade he sent warnings to the king, Prime Minister William Pitt, and to parliament of imminent judgement, but did not publish these until the two volume *A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times* appeared in 1794. The book went through a number of ever-expanding editions over the following year, as he incorporated new insights and visions. This included several produced in London and Dublin, eighteen in the United States, and translations into French and German (Madden 2010, 88). Funded by wealthy supporters, Brothers distributed his book freely to visitors – including admirers who learned of him through the press, fashionable curiosity seekers, and mockers. (Garrett 1975, 187). He believed that he would claim supreme power and usurp George III, and that he was destined to travel to the Holy Land where he would become universal king in Jerusalem. Brothers attracted followers from across the social spectrum, including artisans and prophetic seekers John Wright and William Bryan, engraver William Sharp, and MP Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, who spoke in his support in parliament. His pictures were widely circulated in popular magazines. For example, *Harrison's Lady Pocket Magazine* offered readers pictures of the Prince of Wales, Richard Brothers, and the Italian Opera House in Haymarket in April 1795 (Madden 2010, 74).

[3.2] Given his work's publication during fears of popular uprisings, and war between Britain and revolutionary France, it is unsurprising that he attracted the attention of the authorities. On 4<sup>th</sup> March 1795 Brothers was arrested on suspicion of treason. He was eventually committed to a private asylum in Islington, where he remained for the next eleven years (Madden 2010, 142-146). He continued to publish during his confinement, although he lost the majority of his supporters to fellow prophet Joanna Southcott (1750-1814) by the early nineteenth century. Southcott was a domestic servant and upholsterer from Exeter, who had

received visions since 1792. She first came to London in a bid to obtain Brothers's release in May 1802. However, she soon came to believe that she had inherited Brothers's mantle.

Although Brothers and Southcott never met, they engaged in a fierce printed debate (Madden 2010, 261-291). Southcott further developed the nascent celebrity culture that Brothers had tapped into. Her textual productivity (her 65 published works amount to 5000 pages, with double that remaining in manuscript) ensured that her followers seldom lacked new reading material (Bowerbank 2004). Southcott also offered pieces of material culture that allowed her followers to connect with her. Devotees were encouraged to send signed affirmations that they had read her key works, which she would countersign and seal with a special symbol. She distributed at least 20,000 of these seals, as well as setting up a network of chapels.

[3.3] Brothers's and Southcott's works both show evidence of the three links between prophecy and fan fiction discussed above: its archontic nature, self-insertion, and the development of affective textual communities based around characters. Both prophets' attitude to the Bible evidenced an approach of building on past interpretations, filling textual gaps, and moving to correct perceived flaws in the plot or characters described in scripture. According to Brothers, God informed him that '[t]here is no other man', who could correct misinterpretations of the sacred texts 'that they may be restored as they were in the beginning, but yourself' (Brothers 1794b, iii). 'The alterations I have made in copying some of the prophecies', he noted, 'is by the direction and command of the Lord God' (Brothers 1794a, 37). The prophet therefore reprinted biblical texts with his own parenthetical comments incorporated in his publications. For example, when quoting Isaiah 11: 'And in that day there shall be a ROOT OF JESSE (meaning myself) which shall stand for a SIGN to the People (meaning the Jews) to it shall the Gentiles seek; and his REST (meaning his Government at Jerusalem) shall be glorious' (Brothers 1794a, 13).

[3.4] When his calculations of prophetic dates proved erroneous, Brothers was therefore able to go back to the Bible and edit the text – the numbers provided in the Book of Daniel, for example, were shown to have been perverted through copying errors that he could correct (Brothers 1795, 19-23). As one contemporary critic noted, ‘when one visionary being had totally receded from his view, his fertile imagination could directly supply its place with another, which appeared, vanished, and was succeeded by another, for such his creative fancy had always the power to command’ (Moser 1795, 28). Southcott employed a slightly different approach to the Bible. She claimed that her prophecies both interpreted and opened the text: ‘that the Bible was unfinished and pointed to a new fulfilment and a new revelation’ in her own works (Niblett 2015, 85). She engaged in creative exploration of the text, re-writing it in the form of rhyming verse interspersed with commentary. She also experimented with textual form – including deliberately playing with the order of texts she received. For example, she published a prophecy in one book and its explanation in another – both parts needing to be read together to make sense of her actual message (Juster 2003, 171-177). At another point, she wove together a series of separate scriptural phrases in reverse order, to form a new prophecy that began with the apocalypse, ran through the gospels, prophets and psalms, to end with the creation ‘to begin with the last and to bring it back to the first’ (Southcott 1802a, 65).

[3.5] This form of editing, gap-filling, and constant building on previous interpretations might appear to suggest a lack of reverence for scripture. However, the prophets’ actions were not representative of a low-view of the text, but instead of a close affective connection to it. At one point, when Southcott read of Christ’s death ‘his love and sufferings from the manger to the cross appeared before me in such lively colours, that it would be fruitless to pen the feelings of my heart’. This led her to discuss her personal relationship with the Bible. She recalled that her father had reprimanded her as a girl for becoming too ‘affected’ by the



text. Nonetheless, ‘the more I thought to give it up, the more the Bible broke in upon me’ (Southcott 1802a, 85-86). Southcott therefore denied that she added to the sacred text. Instead, her work elaborated on it, playing at the margins to expand it through her textual productivity. ‘By adding thereto’, she noted in 1802, ‘is to say things they cannot find scripture proof for. Now if any man will prove that I have spoken what I cannot bring scripture proof for, I will give it up’ (Southcott 1802b, 232).

#### **4. Self-Insertion and Character Ownership**

[4.1] While their works transformed and elaborated on the Bible, Brothers and Southcott also practiced self-insertion into the biblical text. Firstly, this was through close identification with biblical characters. This built on the affective tradition in which an individual believed that they were re-living the events in a particular biblical figure’s life (Nielsen 2017). For Brothers, this included imaginatively re-experiencing key events in the lives of Moses and Jeremiah. For example, he framed his initial reticence to embrace his calling through a direct reference to a biblical life: ‘like Moses in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Exodus, [I] begged earnestly to decline the favour of governing in his [God’s] service: no excuse would be admitted’ (Brothers 1795, 30). As with Moses, so Brothers was given a powerful rod through which God would do miracles and therefore prove his prophetic identity (Brothers 1794b, 25-28; 1795, 33). But Moses was not the only prophet that Brothers appropriated. ‘The prophecies of JEREMIAH’, he noted, ‘bear so intimate a resemblance to my own, that the LORD GOD, whose servant I am, commands me to refer all people of the present to them.’ Like Brothers, Jeremiah’s contemporaries had mocked and imprisoned him. Yet, as Brothers noted, no reader would now deny ‘that Jeremiah was a beloved prophet, and a great one also’. So he replicated Jeremiah’s experiences, in effect reliving his life (Brothers 1795, 34).

[4.2] When worrying about how the public would view his interpretations, Brothers spoke to God ‘*almost similar to what the Prophet Samuel said when he was commanded to anoint David to be King of Israel*’, and feared the political impacts of God’s orders (Brothers 1794a, 13).<sup>1</sup> Most controversially, Brothers claimed the identity of several biblical types usually applied to Jesus. Revelation 5 introduced a figure on a throne that is both the ‘lion of the tribe of Judah’ and ‘a lamb, as if it has been slain’ who opened the sealed books of the prophecy. Commentators, almost universally, applied this to Christ. Brothers, however, believed that the figure referred to him:

St. JOHN call him a Lion! because [sic] He’s bold,  
To open seals, and secret things unfold!  
‘The only Man on Earth’ that could be found,  
Or yet in Heaven, or its expanse around,  
To open that Book, which God himself had seal’d,  
Then shew its contents, as God the parts reveal’d!  
For which He suffers, and is nearly slain,  
No lamb more innocent—without a stain.  
(Brothers 1802, 71)

[4.3] The Bible also proved to be the impetus for Brothers to construct a detailed imagined world. As Mark Wolf has argued, in contemporary popular culture the Bible has often served as an ‘Ur-text’ for world building, for both historical utopias and contemporary science fiction (Wolf 2012, 124). Brothers’s *A Description of Jerusalem* (1801) engaged in detailed construction of an imagined world. He laid out in detail the rebuilt city and restored Holy Land that would be the site of his future reign. This included architectural maps of the city,

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<sup>1</sup> Italics as in original source

the flags and livery of his new nation, and a legal system to govern it. Brothers imagined his readers as literal co-creators in this endeavour. Not only would they contribute to the construction of the city in the future, but they were encouraged to use *A Description* to sketch new plans and pictures of it:

From the regular methodical description I have given, any person that pleases may draw the plan with a pen on paper. Ladies may do it for amusement, gentlemen as an honourable employment to enlarge the sphere of their knowledge, and add new strength to their minds...

(Brothers 1801, 27)

[4.4] Southcott did not chart any imagined cities. However, she was as forceful as Brothers in claiming a place within the biblical narrative. Most notoriously, she claimed to be the ‘woman clothed in the sun’ mentioned in Revelation 12: ‘I must stand the trial of what I say, as I am ordered to put in print. The woman in the 12<sup>th</sup> chap. of Revelations [*sic*] is myself’ (Southcott 1802b, 42). A particularly valued (and respectable) supporter who died suddenly, Basil Bruce, became the child God catches up to the heaven in the same chapter of Revelation, as his untimely death would keep him safe from his doubts and affirm the certainty of Southcott’s prophecies (Southcott 1802a, 32). Like Brothers, she also creatively relived the lives of biblical characters. At one point, she was tested like Abraham, and received the same promises from God: ‘as I did unto Abraham, I will make with thee an everlasting covenant’ (Southcott 1802b, 27).

[4.5] Given that both prophets inserted themselves into the biblical text, it is perhaps unsurprising that they clashed. Interpretations of this dispute have often centred on gender and personality conflicts. Where viewing prophecy through the lens of fan fiction can help in this discussion is to focus the debate on a different area – the implications of claiming

ownership over characters that generated deep affective responses. This sheds new light on the way in which the prophets' dispute was, at its root, a textual claim related to the 'correct' use of characters from the canon of scripture. For Brothers, Southcott's self-insertion perverted the core text, and undermined his claim to be its authoritative interpreter. The woman clothed in the sun, according to him, referred to his future consort as divine king (Brothers 1794b, 77-79; 1802, 61). As well as misattributing the figure, Brothers argued that Southcott erred in introducing a feminine component to salvation. For Southcott the snake in the Eden narrative was a Miltonic devil, who fought against women throughout the Bible, until she confirmed his defeat (Southcott 1815 [1802]). For Brothers, the snake was simply a snake. In effect, Southcott had transformed a particular narrative into a general one, leading her to misunderstand the Bible and falsely insert herself in stories in which she didn't belong. To claim to be the woman was, for Brothers, the mark of a 'wild, impudent, misguided, seditious, fanatic' (Brothers 1802, 61).

[4.6] In response, Southcott found that Brothers's self-insertion into the text was blasphemous. Here her work demonstrated the third intersection between prophecy and fan fiction, as her critique emphasised the affective importance of biblical characters to a community of readers. Brothers claimed that references made to Jesus applied to him, and appropriated the mantle of the prophets while predicting events that were later falsified. 'There were many things he placed to himself,' noted Southcott, 'which appeared a stumbling-block to them [readers], where he placed himself in many parts of the Scriptures' (Southcott 1806, 16-17). Brothers's sin was not simply failing to live up to the exalted position he claimed, but that he wrongly implied an ownership over biblical characters who should serve as a community resource. As Judge has noted, eighteenth-century novel writers at times viewed themselves as custodians, protecting their characters, whereas readers often viewed them as belonging to the wider community (Judge 2009, 56). Brothers therefore

attempted to limit competing claims on biblical characters – in Southcott’s view denying their wider use to readers.

[4.7] This links to her criticism of Brothers for his growing pride, including a desire to commercialise his prophecy. Brothers has given into pride, and lost sight of the fact that his role was not to exalt himself, but to oversee a community of the faithful. As in fan fiction, where some community members feel that commercialisation undermines the broader community and the concept of writing as loving work (Jamison 2013, 185-258), so temptation for personal gain from the marketplace undermined the prophetic office.

Dependent mostly on the largesse of her supporters in order to print her works, Southcott did not seek to make money from what she believed was a developing community resource. At one point, she heard Satan tempt her to adapt her works along more commercial lines: ‘I will make thee the first writer in the world; and where thou hast one friend, I will gain thee one thousand. Now, dost thou now know *many* have had thousands of pounds for begin clever in writing...’ In response, she affirmed that she would rather die than give up her work (Southcott 1802c, 9). Her productivity was a literal labour of love.

[4.8] As she meditated on Brothers’s claims, Southcott was aware that she might be accused of hypocrisy. She feared that ‘will not the world say, thou hast applied the Scriptures to thyself, as being the woman mentioned in the Revelation?’. However, while Brothers’s self-insertion closed down meaning by attempting to possess biblical characters and claim them for himself, Southcott claimed them only in a reflective, communal capacity. Southcott therefore argued that while she was the ‘woman clothed in the sun’, ‘the Scriptures are not pointed out to thee as a mere mortal, only alluding to thyself’ (Southcott 1806, 22). Instead, her narrative interpretation of the Bible allowed for her to serve as a representation of the character that, in turn, would be passed on to her followers. She was the woman of Revelation 12, but this was also a figure who could, through her maternal nature, speak to a

community that she metaphorically mothered (Southcott 1806, 23). For Southcott, these characters therefore formed an affective resource. Her works invited comment, and often appeared as a result of correspondence she received relating to particular claims on character. In 1804's *True Explanation of the Bible*, for instance, she wrote a meditation for a reader 'who having come to the part where Joanna is mentioned as the Bride in the Revelations [sic], was afraid to read any further' (Southcott 1804, 87).

[4.9] Brothers, on the other hand, promoted the idea of an affective community formed directly around his identity as prophet. The connections that readers had with biblical characters were therefore channelled through him, and towards his future hopes that his readers would gather in a restored Jerusalem. This was clear from the descriptions of the future that he imagined, in which his affective response to the city was clearly set out:

Again all is admirable; every new building increases the beauty! While it astonishes one moment, the next it draws the most lively feelings of sensibility from the heart. Sorrow is barely admitted for an instant when it is succeeded by joy...

(Brothers 1801, 19)

[4.10] Brothers's followers constructed themselves as a textual community built on shared interpretations of scripture. Thomas Taylor, an otherwise unknown follower driven to print by his desire to vindicate the prophet, described Brothers repeatedly as his 'friend', despite acknowledging 'I have never seen RICHARD BROTHERS personally'. The depth of Brothers's engagement with the Bible, however, changed his mind (Taylor 1795, A2r). The prophet's former landlady, Sarah Green, had testified that he was insane in the earlier 1790s, but was converted when she had dreams of Brothers as John the Baptist, with particular Bible passages inscribed upon his clothing (Green 1795, 6-8). Another follower, Henry Offley, found that Brothers's prophecies reignited his love for scripture. After reading the prophet's

work 'I began to feel my deficiency in the knowledge of divine revelation and I began to peruse the scriptures with avidity' (Offley 1795, xxiii).

[4.11] Similarly, Southcott's supporters found that affective responses to her texts brought them together. Partly, this was inspired by encouragement to participatory reading in her works. For example, when the Spirit ordered Southcott to place crosses beside certain parts of her earlier works, she suggested that her readers do the same. Heavily annotated Southcottian bibles suggest that this advice was followed (Juster 2003, 172). The prophet's work could also generate a sense of community in other ways. Basil Bruce, on receiving a personal letter from the prophet in 1801, wrote that 'to attempt to describe the emotions of my soul, or the feelings of a heart fraught with the love of God would be in vain' (Southcott 1802b, 21). Reading the letter to his wife, 'I was frequently interrupted by the tears of joy gushing from my astonished eyes' (Southcott 1802b, 24). Later letters were read in groups, which gathered to analyse them and interpret scripture together. After one letter, Bruce met with the engraver William Sharp, cobbler William Bryan and Reverend Thomas Webster. On opening the letters 'language cannot express our ravished sense at the perusal of them' and the group spent a 'most delightful and heavenly evening' together (Southcott 1802b, 29).

## **5. Conclusion**

[5.1] The aim of this article has been to provide a brief overview of the way in which prophecy in the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, with its shifting media ecology, can be viewed as a form of transformative work with significant analogies to fan fiction. Of course, there is a danger in making comparisons between periods without appropriate historical contextualization; eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prophetic

communities were not the same as contemporary fandoms. There are two obvious differences. First, the nature of online communities is very different to the textual culture of circulating letters and books in the earlier period. Second, and most importantly, prophets believed that they were genuinely receiving messages from God when they interpreted the Bible. While contemporary fan fiction writers usually engage with a text 'as if' real (Saler 2012), Southcott and Brothers genuinely believed that what they wrote represented reality.

[5.2] Nonetheless, viewing prophecy as a form of transformative work is helpful for both historians and contemporary fan fiction scholars. Comparisons between fan fiction and older writing practices can provide new ways of viewing historical actors and their behaviours that benefits both historians and those working on fandom. It offers historians an opportunity to move beyond debates on theology, gender, and politics as motivations in prophecy, and to explore prophecy as a form of affectively motivated textual transformation. Inter-prophetic disputes therefore often focused on characters and the affective links prophets and their communities built with them. This is not to claim that factors such as theology, gender and politics were unimportant, but to argue that this new way of looking at prophecy opens up insights into the way in which prophetic groups operated and communities formed. Applying a fannish lens to these historical figures helps to explain why they were able to have such influence, and using elements of fan fiction theory can help the historian understand the ways in which they transformed scripture.

[5.3] For those studying fans and fandom, examining prophecy as a form of transformative work provides a further antecedent for contemporary fan practices. It offers a case study of the way in which readers affectively connected with texts and engaged in transformative practices in a very different media ecology. Understanding how these transformations worked, and the controversies they caused, provides insight into how communities built around texts react to challenges to character ownership and identification, particularly when



subaltern groups make claims to them, as Southcott did to the 'woman clothed in the sun'.

Given the fierceness of these debates in contemporary online fandoms, examining earlier attempts by men to 'reclaim' characters from women writers provides helpful background for discussions of toxic masculinity in fandom.

[5.4] Finally, this historical study raises the question of where fan studies draws the boundary when identifying transformative works. If early modern prophecy can be viewed as a transformative work, this suggests that modern prophecy can also be examined in this way. This broadens the sorts of texts than fan studies looks at, offering new insights into the way in which online religious communities use fannish practices as part of the construction of their lifeworld. Using this lens could therefore provide unexpected insight into how these groups engage with wider society. Like Brothers, the Branch Davidian leader David Koresh (1959-1993) also claimed to be the 'slain lamb' of Revelation 5-6, an identity that played a key role to his actions during the 1993 FBI siege of the Davidians' compound in Waco, Texas. Interestingly, while the FBI treated this identification as a sign of his insanity, later scholarship on the siege suggested that approaches that treated seriously issues of the ownership and identification of biblical characters were those that got through to the Davidians inside the compound (Wessinger 2000, 91-100). Thinking about prophecy as a form of transformative work therefore offers not only different ways of looking at the intersections of religion and broader culture, but also better understandings of contemporary prophetic communities.

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