



POPULAR PROPHECY  
IN  
SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND:  
BY MOUTH AND PEN  
IN THE  
ALEHOUSE AND FROM THE PULPIT

Frances M. Gladwin

Department of History

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## ABSTRACT

Many historians of popular culture propose that during the sixteenth century a separation existed between the culture of the educated minority and that of the unlearned majority. Until recently the history of popular culture focused on examples of cultural division. In contrast this thesis presents non-scriptural prophecy as an example of shared culture. Non-scriptural prophecy was a phenomenon that crossed social boundaries and demonstrated the existence of areas of common culture despite the disparity among individuals created by other social, economic and cultural differences. This thesis also questions previous modern depictions of Tudor prophecy and presents a revision of the sources for a study of non-scriptural prophecy in an attempt to rectify the imbalance of many studies unduly influenced by the dominance of elite documentation. This re-examination of non-scriptural prophecies from a historical perspective, rather than a literary one, further uncovers the interests and motivations of non-learned adherents of prophecy and ultimately reveals that many people in the sixteenth century shared a common interest in prophecy that transcended social and other boundaries.

Part one of this thesis, The Definition of Prophecy, contains three chapters that provide a comprehensive definition of the cultural phenomenon. The first chapter reviews definitions of prophecy made by historians and literary scholars since Rupert Taylor published the first book on the subject in 1911. This initial chapter includes a general discussion of all prophetic types identified by scholars of medieval and early modern Europe. The second chapter defines prophecy as people understood the phenomenon in the sixteenth century. This chapter identifies the prophet and other methods of creating or receiving prophecies, while the final chapter in this section

identifies the literary genre of non-scriptural prophecies as a subject separate from their source of creation or dissemination.

Section two of this thesis, The Attack on Prophecy, examines the elite denunciation of non-scriptural prophecies. Learned individuals vilified prophecies predominantly through published treatises and the legislature. Chapter four reviews the practical and theological arguments against prophecy presented by literary commentators. Chapter five examines the laws against sedition, treason and prophecy used by the judiciary in the prosecution of prophesiers.

The final section of this thesis, The Transmission of Prophecy and the Participants, contains four chapters. Chapter six reveals the literary and oral exchange of prophetic knowledge throughout sixteenth-century society. The final three chapters discuss the participants, the nobility, the clergy and the common people, who adhered to prophecies and were known to judicial authorities of the period. This section is an attempt to expose the concerns of those who adhered to prophecy without the undue influence of elite opinion.