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WOMEN, MILLENNIALISM AND MODERNITY: A CONTRIBUTION TO GENDER STUDIES

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Thiota, the Prophecy of 847, and Rudolf of Fulda

At that time [847] a certain woman from Allemania, by the name of Thiota the pseudoprophetess, came to Mainz where in no small way, she disturbed the parish of Bishop Solomon with her prophecies. For she claimed that as if by divine revelation she knew the very day of the End of the world and many other matters which are known only God, and predicted that the Last Day (*ultimum diem saeculi*) would fall that very year. Whence many commoners (*plebs*) of both sexes, terrorstruck, flocked to her, bearing gifts, and offered themselves up to her with their prayers. And what is still worse, men from the holy orders, setting aside ecclesiastical doctrine, followed her as if she were a master sent from heaven. This women was taken before the presence of the bishops at Saint-Albans and questioned about her claims, and she admitted that a certain priest had suggested these things to her, and that she had said these things for the sake of personal gain. Therefore, by the judgment of the synod, she was publicly whipped, and she shamefully lost the ministry of preaching, which she had rashly and unreasonably (*irrationalabiliter*) appropriated and presumed to claim for herself against the custom of the church; at last confounded, she put an end to her prophecies.

Annales Fuldenses ad an 847; MGH SS I, p.365. Timothy Reuter, *The Annals of Fulda* (Manchester, 1994).

We have here the only account of a lone female charismatic prophet to be found in early medieval documents. We owe this written narrative to the owl opposition, in this case a monk in the imperial monastery of Fulda, a cleric who travelled regularly between his monastery and Mainz and who had close connections to the imperial court. As an annalist, his work is fairly close to these events, but clearly retrospective, and his language makes his attitude towards the apocalyptic movement immediately clear: Thiota is a pseudo-prophetess, a fraud who was justly

punished and humiliated; the incident appears here with narrative finality.¹ Thiota appears no more,² and one gets the sense that the incident is over. Moreover, by not specifying the contents of her apocalyptic preaching (beyond the, at the point of composition, clearly ridiculous reliance on the date), we have no idea whether she was a chiliast or not.

But let us look closer. First, note the remarkable success of the woman: commoners in large numbers showered her with gifts -- the ultimate sign of commitment for poor people as well as a suggestion that wealthier people were drawn in, as were some clerics. This success is partly due to her choice of the most dramatic form of apocalyptic prophecy, a date in the near future. No prophet, however, could get a following like this unless apocalyptic speculation and eschatological doctrines had been broadly disseminated among the population (a point to which we shall return), and she or he was capable of deploying millennial rhetoric in ways that drew people into a prophetic community. Given the conditions and literature of mid-9th century Carolingian Europe, we can assume that this is neither the first such disturbance of the sort, nor did this woman only start her preaching when Rudolf informs us about her. He picks her up at the point where she has entered onto the public stage with sufficient force to provoke the bishops and inspire our annalist. And Thiota does this with such force, that, momentarily, she takes over the city and the authorities dare not touch her -- a millennial moment. Experience suggests that she may have been so preaching for over a decade, and that her apocalyptic rhetoric may have invoked not merely visionary revelations (these are the hardest to pull off), but also a "reading" of past and current events going back as far as forty years earlier.³ The notable success she has with clerics reinforces these suspicions; given their training, which was supposed to inoculate them against millennial frenzies, they were far more likely to be impressed with historically imbedded prophecies and substantive social teachings..

In fact, one of the most interesting elements of this passage is its reference to these apocalyptic clerics who have "put aside" their doctrines. These doctrines for owls, were precisely those Augustine had worked out in his letter to the rooster-bishop Hesychius in 418-19, arguments to which he referred his readers at the appropriate place in the his grand finale to the City of God. (This is where Augustine "defeats" chiliasm in the West when he reinterprets the millennium not as something real, to come, but as something spiritual, already in progress.)⁴ Bede had obligingly copied these teachings on the end out at the conclusion to his computistical work the previous century, and continental clerics had disseminated the text throughout the

¹ On the relationship of documentary records to millennial movements, see Richard Landes "On Owls, Roosters, and Apocalyptic Time: A Historical Method for Reading a Refractory Documentation," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 49 (1996): 165-85. <http://www.mille.org/landes-rob.htm>

² As opposed, for example, to the young girl in the *Royal Frankish Annals* who goes one year without eating, and the is mentioned again at the end of her third year of no eating: ad an. 823, 825.

³ . O'Leary, *Arguing the Millennium* (Oxford, 1994), pp. *-*. Note that in 806 there was an eclipse of the moon in which a cross appeared, a sign which not only deeply impressed contemporaries -- some of the annals that reported it actually drew the vision, but had historians trying to "explain it," to tie it down to signifiers, for over two centuries (Astronomer [840s], Ademar of Chabannes [1027]; see Richard Landes, *Relics, Apocalypse, and the Deceits of History* (Cambridge Mass., 1995), pp. 134, 148.

⁴ R. Landes, "Lest the Millennium be Fulfilled: Apocalyptic Expectations and the Pattern of Western Chronography, 100-800 CE," *The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages*, ed. W. Verbeke, D. Verhelst, and A. Welkenhuysen (Leuven: Katholieke U., 1988), pp. 156-65; Paula Fredriksen, "Apocalypse and Redemption in Early Christianity: From John of Patmos to Augustine of Hippo," *Vigiliae Christianae* 45 (1991), *-*.*.

Carolingian world by Rudolf's day. Their basic lesson: do not say the end is near (i.e. do not become a rooster); and do not attach the symbolism of the book of Revelation to current events.

With the addition, then, of the details about clerical defections, this incident offers a nice illustration to the point that, in the rooster's hour, the voice of the owls is a chaff in the wind. Augustinian arguments, which normally dominate public discourse, become singularly ineffective in apocalyptic time, and among a populace "in pursuit of the millennium." Thus the composer makes an extraordinary admission in telling us of how powerful the prophet become, that even clerics, despite their Augustinian training and institutional bias, dropped all caution and joined in her train.⁵ And overcoming theological problems pales besides the gender problems they had to overcome in order to follow a female prophet. We can hear the indignation and scandal in Rudolf's voice: as if she were a heaven sent *magistra*! Impossible! Only men can be teachers like that. That is the very definition of "normal time."

But there is more to mine in Rudolf's account. Although he does not say it openly – understandably – his account implies that Thiota preached unmolested until the passage of her predicted date. In a pattern not uncommon in situations where a charismatic prophet gains a large and non-violent following, the elites do not intervene until after the movement has failed in its own terms. Thus, given the fact that she taught and "judged" long enough to get all those presents and that clerical following, it seems likely that only after her prophecy's failure did the church arrest and punish her. Although Rudolf has her arrest and punishment precede the loss of her ministry, both his language and the circumstances suggest otherwise. He speaks of her as having shamefully lost her prophetic ministry, of being at last confounded, of her putting an end to her prophecies herself.

While one could conceivably argue that the shame of public whipping put an end to her ministry, the language implies the opposite: the whipping that is the subject of "imposed an end to her prophetic, but Thiota herself. Indeed, the judgment and punishments of an owls synod could have increased the commitment and hostility of her following. Pre-emptive strikes against millennial prophets are most difficult: if they are too soft – a whipping – they will not send an apocalyptic prophet and followers slinking away whimpering. On the contrary, it becomes a badge of honor and authenticity. If one wishes to silence a rooster in its prime, one must kill it. Otherwise it can metastasize (as did the followers of the "False Christ of Bourges" in the 6th century), filling the countryside with believers implacably hostile to the Church. If, as Rudolf reports, Thiota had clerics on her side, such pre-emptive action would have produced especially dangerous reactions. These men, learned in scriptures, could, like Cathars and Lutherans, make the case that the Church was an agent of Antichrist.

If one reconstructs the incident according to the dynamics of apocalyptic time and the language (rather than the narrative sequence) of the text, the details make sense: "When she had shamefully lost her ministry of preaching": time had robbed of her prophetic ministry; "she was taken before the court and whipped": she then fell prey to the retribution of those clerics whom, for a brief but extended moment, she had publicly humiliated; "At last confounded": whipped and exposed as a charlatan, they could dismiss her, and she, herself, would cease to prophecy.

⁵ It is, by the way, possible that one of these clerics wrote something, a genuinely apocalyptic document, at this time; but that, were it ever composed, does not survive.

Such a reconstruction suggests a few more points. It is unlikely that her message was one of active chiliasm, which, like that of the Christ of Bourges, would have elicited prompt action. This does not mean, however, that her teachings were not profoundly subversive. Peasants who think the world about to end tend not to work their (or their masters') fields.⁶ The very notion of a *magistra* dominating the public discourse conveys the sense among the owls who dominate normal time, that the world had been turned upside down.

This situation, as here interpreted, raises still larger questions. What did the conservative clergy like Rudolf and the bishop of the city, Rabanus Maurus, do while they waited her out? What was their "explanation" of events? How did they debate with her followers? Did the passage of her date and her consequent humiliation put an end to such prophecy? Was Rabanus made bishop of the city of Mainz to replace Solomon in 848 because of this incident? Was there a relationship between this incident and the condemnation, the very year Rabanus took over, of Gottschalk for a predestinarian heresy?⁷ How many ecclesiastical authorities were present at both trials, and was there a larger theological and social statement they were making with these twin actions? Did people look back on this incident when, three years later, a devastating famine drove people to cannibalism and Bishop Rabanus to feeding hundreds of paupers daily? What did people think when, ten year later a series of prodigies terrified the populace of the entire region and, on January 1, 858 the church where Thiota and Gottschalk was condemned was destroyed by an earthquake?⁸ How did clerics deal with the continued return of prodigies and infectious fears? Did these kinds of events play any role in the west Frankish sworn brotherhood of commoners who fought off the Vikings in 859 and then were slaughtered by the Frankish aristocracy for having "imprudently" engaged in a collective oath.⁹ We may not know the answers, and, were we flies on the wall at the time, the level of discussion we overheard may have been not very theologically enlightening, but for social history such encounters are of vital significance.

This is how, if one is really optimistic, one tries to reason with medievalists about the meaning of a text and how to reconstruct the dynamics of social interactions in a period with so little documentation, especially about women and commoners. I begin my remarks on gender and millennialism with this story because I think it raises a number of key issues:

- *The role of women in the early stages of millennial movements.* We find them in many cases, often as companions of the prophet (Montanus, False Christ of Bourges), and more generally among the most enthusiastic and effective of disciples in "rousing millennial energy (Peace Assemblies, the Great Awakening).

⁶ Hippolytus, *In Danielelem; Sabbatians* -- and behind such a refusal lies not mere laziness, but the surfacing of a wide range of hidden transcripts in which the very "the fear and reverence for superior powers" is lost

⁷ Augustine's doctrines of predestination were part of the anti-apocalyptic theology he forged in the 410s.

⁸ The prodigies of the end of 857 are also reported by the author of the Saint-Bertin annals. On the anti-clerical responses of the populace to the destruction of churches, see the letter of Gerard of Cambrai of 1032

⁹ "The Danes devastated the area beyond the Scheld river. The promiscuous commonfolk between the Seine and the Loire, swearing together (coniurans) among themselves, strongly resisted the Danes anchored along the Seine. But because they had imprudently undertaken their conspiracy (coniuratio), they were easily slaughtered by the more powerful of our men." *Annals of Saint Bertin*.

- The role of apocalyptic time in creating possibilities for women not only to enter public space, but to dominate it, to overthrow the previous “judges” and “teachers” of public order. Few historians think of the early middle ages as a time when a female commer could “take over” a major city for a year.
- The absence of attention to this incident and its implications, that both historians and feminist scholars paid to this incident and other millennial material. Thiota is virtually unknown to non-Carolingian historians (and to most of them too), and even people who look at the most messianic of female religious figures of the later Middle Ages do not raise her case as part of their analysis.
- This reflects a larger lack of attention to millennial material, both by historians and, surprisingly, in their wake, by feminists.

I’d like to use Thiota then as a springboard for further discussion.

Women and the millennium

The prominence of women in millennial movements is an unexamined commonplace: in the early stages of charisma, they are active and influential; in the latter stages of routinization, they are marginalized and driven from public prominence.¹⁰ While I think this is probably right most of the time, it still bears a great deal more attention than it has thus far received. This is true, not only for the dynamics of the earlier stages of millennial movements, but also for later ones, where I suspect we will find a range of reactions, some clearly negative for women, others, not so negative. In any case, we need more of a sense of the dynamics here, so that historians can begin to reinterpret their sources.

For example, I would like to argue for the prominence of women in the early, charismatic peace councils. These early mass assemblies, which occurred at the end of the 10th century and the early 11th (ca. 980-1040) were characterized by many of the characteristics of the Great Awakenings – mass, open-field assemblies of people from all walks of life, miraculous healings, enormous enthusiasm and joy, the language of forgiveness and repentance, or love and peace. Historians call this the “sanctified peace” because the assemblies were “confirmed” by miracles and enforced by spiritual sanctions rather than the (later) “institutionalized peace” where legitimacy came from official authorities (dukes, kings, bishops) and enforcement by bodies empowered to punish.¹¹

Sanctified peace assemblies seem like ideal sites for the expression of female millennial energy. Obviously any arena in which weapons are laid down and disputes handled by discourse (like civil society) favors women, but these fervent revivalist gatherings, these arenas of popular enthusiasm, seem especially well suited to women’s social spirituality. Indeed we have evidence to support such a reconstruction. The sources emphasize the presence of women – people of all ages and both sexes – goes the expression. This alone is remarkable since women “normally”

¹⁰ For a particularly good example of how this process works, although the author never explores the millennial dimension of her subject, see Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women* (***, ***), on the first Great Awakening in the 18th century.

¹¹ *The Peace of God: Social Violence and Religious Response in France around the Year 1000*, ed. Thomas Head and Richard Landes (Ithaca, 1992).

have no place in ecclesiastical councils. But further, a good portion of the miracles worked at these councils, heal women, often young serving girls, the bottom of the power ladder. Moreover, one of the most prominent of the relic cults to play an important role in the movement was a female saint – Sainte Foi or Saint Faith – and the role of Marian statues begins to take hold precisely at the time of the Peace of God movement and in its major hearth – southern France.

All of this, of course remains conjectural, and a prudent medieval historian should stop there, lest he extend his hypotheses to the breaking point. But let me persist. I suspect that in the aftermath of the failure of the Peace – end of the popular assemblies, replacement of law-enforcement for the spiritual sanctions of communitarian disapproval, return of aristocratic dominance – that commoners, found themselves once again returned men to their plows and women to the hearth. However, things had changed, and the record indicates that commoners everywhere in Europe, but especially in France, were never the same again. The details of this process still need to be explored, but I have already laid out the general line of argument,¹² and wish, here, to go over some of the larger lines of development that I think we can see in the sources.

One of the great advancements of the 11th century is the spread of the watermill throughout France and England. This technology had been available since the late Roman Empire, but it was only in this period that, for the first time, it diffuses far and wide. One historian estimated that the number of mills built in the 11th century trebled the man-hour productivity of France. And I would attribute at least one key aspect to this diffusion to a new sense of cooperation, of positive-sum thinking, that characteristically arises in millennial moments, and clearly marked the early peace councils, with their direct impact on the productivity of the land and the prosperity of the society.

Now the main beneficiary of the watermill, at least initially, was probably women. They were the one's expected to grind the grain by hand – and incredibly slow and tedious job – and they must have been the ones with the most direct liberation from labor as a result of the building of a village mill. What did they do with their newfound time? One area they might have become involved in, one that begins to be noticeable, is the increase in gardens, where legumes and other protein-rich foods can be grown. These high-intensity, low yield sites provided a crucial supplement, and, given what we know about protein deficiencies and child development, it is safe to argue that this supplement may, in part, account for the levels of energy and intelligence that European commoners show, from that point onward.

What I am trying to suggest with this broad speculation is the following: All millennial movements are in for disappointment – no matter how successful, they cannot meet messianic expectations. The period of disappointment, when the group must make a landing – hard or soft – back in normal time is the true tribulation of millennial movements. At that time volatile dynamics (including the behavior of the power elites) can push the group either into destructive and self-destructive paths, or into a mutation that permits the group to survive the reentry and to take a constructive role in the post-apocalyptic society. This was clearly not the story for Thiota, nor for the self-defense league of commoners of 859. It looks like it was for the Peace of God and for the self-defense leagues of commoners known as communes, in the 11th century. The

¹² <http://www.mille.org/wgt-prec.html>

unusually prominent, if not textually visible, role I am suggesting here for women in the economic and social transformations of the 11th and 12th centuries, may show up in the extraordinary appearance of “courtly love” in 12th-century France, a cultural phenomenon which, however one wishes to characterize it, represents a most unusual cultural phenomenon.

The millennial groups who make the adjustment to normal time are often among the society’s most socially creative groups, especially in the adoption of new, cutting-edge technology, partly because they have the social pliability to reorganize around its use that more organic, and traditional, communities may lack. The evidence for women in the creation of communities, suggests that they may play important roles in the process of adjustment, acculturation, and, I think it important to note, modernization. Thus women may not only play important roles in early stages of millennialism, but also, although less prominent, in some of the resolutions.

Such observations bring us to the following correlations between millennialism, women, and modernity.

Women and millennialism

- Women prominent in millennial movements both
 - in the early stages
 - sometimes, in handling cognitive dissonance
- Millennial movements bring women, therefore into public prominence and then, in the period of adjustment to normal time and social norms, tend to push them out of the lime-light.
- Hypothesis: Women play a key role in the successful “re-entry” of apocalyptic millennial groups into “normal” time

Millennium and Modernity

- Millennial movements are prominent in the process of modernization both as
 - anti-modernist (Cohn thesis)
 - modernist acculturation (Wallace thesis)
- Modernity leaves in its wake a series of social and environmental frictions that can be very damaging
 - With the globalization of modern industrialized market economies, the size of this toxic wake and its social implications increases dramatically
 - These are problems of relationship: people’s relationship to each other, and to the physical world. Although modern civil society has significantly reduced open violence in human interaction, it has nonetheless reoriented significantly violent and abusive relationships to less visible forms of interaction.
 - Millennial movements are often the product of such “modern” developments, and we can anticipate them emerging in one form (anti-modern) or another (modernizing) around the globe in the coming generation
 - The way these millennial movements play out will have a great deal to say about the tenor and direction of the new global culture that is now emerging.

Women and Modernity

- Women play key roles in social creativity
 - Formation of new, voluntary communities
 - New businesses, new religions
- There is a high correlation between women's prominence in the public space and civil society, increasing the more advanced the stages of modern society
- Modern culture inevitably confronts various kinds of gender crisis
 - Women as leaders and as sexually and financially independent individuals
 - Tampering with tradition and experimenting with new forms of interaction, not all successful.
 - Threats to both past patterns of interaction and concerns for future generations

Conclusion

As a programmatic statement for research in gender and millennial studies, I propose the following:

- 1) People working on the role of women in society, and especially on the conditions under which women achieve a public voice, need to become more familiar with the history and dynamics of millennialism. Similarly, millennial scholars need to become more familiar with gender studies in order to understand dynamics whose significance they might otherwise not understand.
- 2) Given the current situation with globalization of markets and communications systems, we can expect a large number of millennial movements the world over.
- 3) This is an extraordinary opportunity to study the role of women in the launching out of, and re-entry of these movements into normal time, before the retrospective perfect takes over and destroys the traces of anomalous behavior.