Prophecies circulated in the north in the months preceding the rebellion. Some promised the arrival of better days, while others apparently threatened a turn for the worse if the Queen should put down the northern nobility. For this rising, like so many others, we have few words of the rebels themselves and have to rely on what outside, generally hostile, observers chose to tell us. The Protestant polemicists who responded to the revolt made repeated curt and dismissive allusions to the prophecies and their role. The *Ballad Against Rebellious and False Rumors*, for example, noted that

Some sayth this year there shall be hapte,
Much trouble in the land:
Of prophecies they carp and clap,
As they that have them scanned,
Doth tell them so abroad.¹

William Wharton, a conspiracy-minded Protestant who regularly sent missives warning Cecil of all sorts of nefarious Catholic deeds, later reported the circulation of a book of prophecies among the rebels in which “her Majesty’s person and estate were dishonorably touched.”² Others related “that it is concluded by astronomy that the Scottish damsels shall be Queen and the duke the husband,” thus promising the success of plans to unite Mary Queen of Scots and the duke of Norfolk in marriage and have them succeed to the throne.³ Some noted the role of predictions of a more purely religious focus in triggering the protest. John Phillips mocked those “rebellious papists that hope (as they term it) to have their Golden Day” and condemned that “secret, muttering sort” who talked of the Bull and Moon eclipsing the Sun.⁴
referred to the heraldic device of the earl of Northumberland; the Bull
to that of the earl of Westmoreland. Thomas Norton, perhaps the most
rabidly vociferous of the men who wrote against the rebels, included in
one of his diatribes a prophecy that had recently circulated: “Alas the
Moon shall be called in the house of enemies and prison, whereby is
like to happen to us, especially to the common people, much adversity.”
Derisively, he depicted such prophecies as recent inventions intended
only to deceive the common sort.5

How much currency such prophecies had among the people of the
north will never be known. But Norton and the other polemicists
correctly sought to explain not just the earls’ decision to rise but also
those of the many who joined them. This chapter narrates the rebel-
lion itself, highlighting along the way reasons to deem it, in no small
part, a religious rising with ardent popular support. Traditional ties to
great lords continued to exert a powerful influence, but there no longer
existed in the north a population that “knew no prince but a Percy.”
The Tudor years had produced at least equally powerful incentives for
obedience and quiescence. Few people would enter rebellion lightly or
merely at the whim of their local lords. Nor would the lords themselves
find it easy to justify a move from grumbling complaint to forceful
action. So what was it, what combination of factors beyond lordly ties,
that convinced people to act?

From conspiracy to revolt

The main impetus moving the earls from conspiracy to revolt lay in
the actions of the Queen, who feared their intentions. Admittedly,
she had reasons aplenty to be suspicious of Thomas Percy, seventh
earl of Northumberland. His family had a tradition of both loyal
service and rebellion; the latter had most recently been exhibited by
his father’s participation in the Pilgrimage of Grace. Long a tradi-
tionalist, and deemed a “rank papist” in 1559, he became formally
reconciled to the Catholic Church in late 1567 or early 1568 by Master
Copley, a wandering priest. His wife, Anne, was a strong-minded woman
who shared his religious views. His revived Catholicism sharpened his
existing sense of grievance at the slights and insults he had received at
Elizabeth’s hands.

And insults he had received in abundance. To the detriment of his
and other ancient families, the early Tudors had pursued the twinned
projects of taming “overmighty subjects” and extending effective royal
control into outlying regions. In furtherance of these goals, Henry VIII