

Mother Shipton investigated/Chapter 2

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Chapter Second.

THE MOTHER SHIPTON OF ROMANCE—RICHARD HEAD'S BOOK—HOW URSULA SHIPTON'S MOTHER MARRIED THE DEVIL—FORMULA TO BE REPEATED BY THOSE WHO WISH TO ALLY THEMSELVES TO THE EVIL ONE—THE BIRTH OF MOTHER SHIPTON—HER WONDERFUL NOSE—HER BABYHOOD AND SCHOOLDAYS—HER ALLEGED PROPHECIES AND HER DEATH.

The miraculous incidents in the life of Mother Shipton, as published in various almanacs and pamphlets during the last 200 years, are, for the most part, culled from a book written by Richard Head. The earliest extant edition of this work is dated 1684, and to it his initials only are attached. Another edition dated 1687 has his name appended to the preface. The first of these editions is in the British Museum Library, and the following is a copy of its title page:—

The

Life and Death

of

Mother Shipton.

Being not only a true Account of her Strange BIRTH, and most Important Passages of her LIFE, but also of her Prophecies: Now newly Collected. and Historically Experienced, from the time of her Birth, in the Reign of KING HENRY the VII, until this present year 1684, Containing the most Important Passages of State during the reign of these Kings and Queens of *England* following, viz.

Henry the VIII.		King James.
Edward the VI.	}	King Charles the I.
Queen Mary.		King Charles the II.
Queen Elizabeth.		Whom God Preserve.

Strangly Preserved amongst other writings belonging to an Old Monastery in *York-shire*, and now published for the Information of Posterity. To which are added some other Prophecies yet unfulfil'd. As also Mr. Holwell's Predictions concerning the *Turk*, *Pope*, and French King, With Reflections thereupon.

Head's book, in the black-letter edition of 1684, sets forth at considerable length, that in 1486 a woman named Agatha Shipton lived in a place called "Naseborough " near the Dropping Well in Yorkshire. Her parents died, and she came to poverty. The Devil approached her in handsome guise, made love to her, carried her off on a demon steed, displayed before her a phantom but apparently real mansion, in which they were married. He promised to give her power over "haile, tempests, with lightning and thunder," the power of traveling from place to place in an instant, and to place the hidden treasures of the earth at her disposal, on certain conditions.

Allured by these promises "she condescended to all the Devil would have her do. Whereupon he bid her say after him, in this manner: *Raziel ellimiham irammish zirigai Psonthonphanchia Raphael elhaveruna tapinotambecaz mitzphecat jarid cuman hapheah Gabriel Heydonturris dungeonis philonomostarkes sophecord hankim*. After she had repeated these words after him, he pluckt her by the Groin, and there immediately grew a kind of Tet, which he instantly suckt, telling her that must be his constant Custom with her, morning and evening; now did he bid her say after him again, *Kametzatuph Odel Pharaz Tumbagin Gall Flemmegen Victow Denmarkeonto*, having finisht his last hellish speech, which the chiefest of his Minions understand not, out of which none but the Devil himself can pick out the meaning; I say, it thundered so horribly, that every clap seemed as if the vaulted roof of Heaven had crackt and was tubling down on her head; and withal, that stately Palace which she thought she had been in, vanisht in a trice; so did her sumptuous apparel: and now her eyes being opened, she found herself in a dark dolesome Wood; a place which from the Creation, had scarce ever enjoyed the benefit of one single Sun-Beam. Whilst she was thinking what course to steer in order to her return, two flaming fiery Dragons appear'd before her tyed to a Chariot, and as she was consulting with her self what was best to be done, she insensibly was hoisted into it, and with speed unimaginable conveyed through the Air to her own poor Cottage."

Signs and wonders thenceforth attended Agatha wherever she went, so that the neighbours were too much afraid of her to persecute her, especially as a winged dragon had once carried her away from the presence of the local magistrate.

In course of time her hellish offspring came into the world. The baby Mother Shipton was at the time of her birth "of an indifferent height, but very morose and big bon'd, her head very long, with very great goggling, but sharp and fiery Eyes, her Nose of an incredible and unproportionable length, having in it many crooks and turnings, adorned with many strange Pimples of divers colours, as Red, Blew, and mixt, which like Vapours of Brimstone gave such a lustre to her affrighted spectators in the dead time of the Night, that one of them confessed several times in my hearing, that her nurse needed no other light to assist her in the performance of her Duty: Her cheeks were of a black swarthy Complexion, much like a mixture of black and yellow jaundies; wrinckled, shrivelled, and very hollow; insomuch, that as the Ribs of her Body, so the impression of her Teeth were easily to be discerned through both sides of her Face, answering one side to the other like the notches in a Valley, excepting only two of them which stood quite out of her Mouth, in imitation of the Tushes of a wild Bore, or the Tooth of an Elephant. . . . The Neck so strangely distorted, that her right shoulder was forced to be a supporter to her head, it being propt up by the help of her chin Her Leggs very crooked and mishapen: The Toes of her feet looking towards her left side; so that it was very hard for any person (could she have stood up) to guess which road she intended to steer her course; because she never could look that way she resolved to go."

This lovely creature was put out to nurse at the charge of the parish. Miraculous and unpleasant incidents occurred around her cradle; her attendants were sometimes goaded to exertion by imps in the form of apes. One day Mother Shipton, cradle and all, were missing; sweet harmony from an unknown source was heard; finally the babe and cradle were found three feet up the chimney. As she grew old her foul fiend of a father visited her daily in the form of a cat, dog, bat, or hog. She was sent to school where, says the chronicler, "her Mistris began to instruct her, as other children, beginning with the Cris-cross-row as they call'd it, showing and naming onely three or four Letters, at first, but to the amazement and astonishment of her Mistris; she exactly pronounced every Letter in the Alphabet without teaching. Hereupon her Mistris, shewed her a Primmer, which she read awel at first sight, as any in the School, and so proceeded in any book was shown her."

Later still Mother Shipton began to tell fortunes, and to foretell the future. High and low flocked to her for information about their private affairs. According to Head she foretold the visit of Henry VIII to France, the death of Cardinal Wolsey, the downfall of the Catholic power in England, the death of the Duke of Somerset, also that of Lady Jane Grey, and various events in the reigns of Elizabeth, Charles I, Oliver Cromwell, and Charles II. Finally she died, honoured and esteemed, and a stone was erected to her memory at Clifton, about a mile from the city of York.

In very early times Mother Shipton figured in comedy. An old book in the British Museum Library has the following title page:—

"The Life of Mother Shipton. A new Comedy. As it was Acted Nineteen days together with great Applause. *Folia Ampla Sybillæ* Virg. Written by T. T.—London, Printed by and for *Peter Lillicrap*, and are to be sold by T. Passinger" [Title-page torn here] "the three Bibles on London Bridge." [Then in writing is added the date 1610, but the real date is about 1660.]

The comedy bears a resemblance here and there to Head's narrative. The scene is laid partly in "*Nasebrough Grove in Yorkshire*;" the heroine and prophetess is Agatha Shipton; no daughter Ursula appears in it at all. On page 15 a village crier is made to announce "O Yes, if any man or woman, in City, Town or Country can tell me tydings of *Agatha Shipton*, the daughter of *Solomon Shipton* Ditch digger lately deceased, let them bring word to the Cryer of the village, and they shall be well rewarded for their pains."

Agatha marries the devil, as in other versions of the story, but cheats him at the last:—

"[Soft Musick and an Angel descends with a Book.]

"*Shipton* despair not but in hope grow strong,
Thou shalt find Mercy though thou hast done wrong;
Read ore this book and in it thou shalt find
The summe of thy aspire to free thy mind
From fear, thy soul secure from harm
Of any Devils! 'tis a happy charme!"

Pluto enters with "all the Devils," and finding Agatha Shipton released from their power exclaims:—

"Was ever Devil gull'd so
"Well lets descend and all Hell shall howl
This full fortnight for losse of *Shipton's* soul.
"[*Exeunt* with horrid Musick].
"*Shipton*. So let them roare.
Whilst I do all their Hellish Acts despise
The higher powers make me truly wise."



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This page was last edited on 13 January 2010, at 02:18.

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