

Mother Shipton investigated/Chapter 5

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Chapter fifth.

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE MOTHER SHIPTON LITERATURE—MODERN AND ANCIENT FABRICATIONS—THE CAREER AND WORKS OF RICHARD HEAD, "GENTLEMAN"—A CURIOUS EXPERIMENT IN DISTILLATION—THE PLAGIARISMS OF THOMPSON THE PLAYWRIGHT—A POSSIBLE ORIGIN OF THE FIRST RECORD—GENERAL AGREEMENT IN THE OLDEST VERSIONS OF MOTHER SHIPTON'S PROPHECIES—HAD MOTHER SHIPTON AN ACTUAL EXISTENCE?—THE BALANCE OF PROBABILITIES.

Sufficient materials have been brought together in the preceding pages, to give some scope now for critical examination.

The three earliest records in the British Museum Library, in relation to Mother Shipton, agree closely with each other, and none of them contain the lines printed on page 13, in my first Chapter, ending with the too celebrated couplet:—

"The world to an end shall come,
In eighteen hundred and eighty one."

The lines in question, and the notorious prophecy about the end of the world, were fabricated about twenty years ago, by Mr. Charles Hindley. The editor of *Notes and Queries* says, in the issue of that journal dated April 26th, 1873:—

"Mr. Charles Hindley, of Brighton, in a letter to us, has made a clean breast of having fabricated the Prophecy quoted at page 450 of our last volume, with some ten others included in his reprint of a chap-book version, published in 1862."

Most of the precise details in Chapter I, about the birth, life and death of Mother Shipton, are fabrications which have been reproduced time after time in chap-books. There is no absolute evidence that any one of the details is true, but there may be some foundation for the incident narrated about Cardinal Wolsey.

The whole of the details in Chapter II, which have interested the public for 200 years, are fabrications. "Richard Head, *gentleman*," drew the contents of every page of his book from his own inner consciousness. His preface to the oldest edition of his work extant (1684), is amusing, and among other items sets forth as follows, how he obtained and dealt with the alleged Shipton manuscript:—

"Many old Manuscripts and rusty Records I turned over, but all in vain; at *last* I was Informed by a Gentleman (whose Ancestors by the Gift of King *Henry* the Eighth, enjoyed a *Monastery* in these parts) that he had in his keeping some Ancient Writings which would in that point satisfie my desire, were they not so Injured by Time, as now not legible to Read; however, I not despairing to find out their meaning, with much Importunity desired to have a sight of them; which having obtained, I took of the best Galls I could get, beat them grosly, and laid them to steep one day in good White-wine, that done, I distilled them with the Wine; and with the Distilled Water that came off them, I wetted handsomely the old Letters, whereby they seemed as fresh and fair as if they had been but newly Written."

From the above it would appear that even in Head's days there was a desire for earlier manuscripts about Mother Shipton.

Chemists will appreciate the novelty of the distilling operation, in which, on the application of heat as described, water came over before alcohol.

The Richard Head, who has so long misdirected the thoughts of large numbers of people, was the son of a minister in Ireland. Head's father was massacred "with many thousands more" in 1641. Mrs. Head then brought her son to England, and he completed his studies at Oxford. He could not afford to remain until he obtained a degree, so turned bookseller. He married, and soon afterwards became a ruined man, in consequence, says Erskine Baker, "of two pernicious passions, viz., poetry and gaming, the one of which is for the most part unprofitable, and the other almost always destructive." He retired to Ireland, where, in 1663, he wrote his only dramatic piece, *Hic et Ubique*, by which piece he acquired great reputation, and some money. As a literary man he had several ups and down in the world; his writings had a strong tinge of indecency. He was drowned in the year 1678, while crossing to the Isle of Wight.

The other piece of fiction of high antiquity, relating to our heroine, is the comedy of the *Life of Mother Shipton*, mentioned on page 25, which is said to have been acted nine days with great applause. The author was one T. Thompson. The British Museum authorities consider the date of the Mother Shipton comedy, to be about 1660, so it ranks with the earliest existing narratives relating to the subject.

In the "Lives and Characters of the *English Dramatick Poets* First begun by Mr. *Langbain*, improv'd and continued down to this Time, by a Careful Hand, *London*: Printed for *William Turner*, at the *White Horse*, without *Temple Bar*, 1699," Langbain describes Thomas Thompson as—

A Poor Plagiary, that could not disguise or improve his Thefts. Those two following Plays go under his Name; viz.

The English Rogue, a Comedy, 4to. 1688, acted (says the Title) before several Persons of Honour, with great Applause, and dedicated to Mrs. *Alice Barrett*.

Mother Shipton, her Life; 4to. The Author hereof says, 'twas acted Nine Days together, with great Applause. Plot from a Book so called in the Prose, 4to., but most of the Characters and Language from *The City Madam*, and *The Chast Maid of Cheapside*.

Thompson's play of *The English Rogue*, was also dramatised from a book by Richard Head, for whose dubious writings Thompson, therefore, seems to have had admiration.

There may be other ancient versions of Mother Shipton's prophecies, but none are known of an earlier date than 1641, and I have dealt with the oldest I can find in the British Museum Library. *Notes and Queries*, of July 25th, 1868, contains a letter from an anonymous writer, making mention of some old editions which may be in other collections. His exceptionally valuable remarks about Mother Shipton and her history I abridge as follows:—

Although the fact of the existence of Mother Shipton rests wholly upon Yorkshire tradition, she can scarcely be regarded as a myth. According to the tradition, the place of her birth was on the picturesque banks of the river Nidd, opposite to the frowning towers of Knaresborough Castle, and at a short distance from St. Robert's Cave—a spot famous for mediæval legends and modern horrors. She first saw the light a few years after the accession of Henry VII. It was not until fourscore years after her death that any account of her extraordinary predictions was recorded in print. A few years before the breaking out of the Civil War, King Charles I frequently passed through Yorkshire, and perhaps the prophecies of the Yorkshire witch then prevalent in the county, captivated the imagination of some follower of the Court, who on his return to London concocted the first pamphlet. It soon became popular, and the following year two reprints appeared, with some additional prophecies. In 1643 a third edition was published, which was followed by two others a few years afterwards. In 1662 and 1663, after the Restoration, the tracts already described were reprinted with some additional matter, and in 1667 the notorious Richard Head, author of several works of a loose description, invented her biography, and gave to the world a new version of her prophecies. This production has been accepted by the popular taste as the authentic history of the Yorkshire witch, and has been reprinted and sold in all parts of the kingdom. Drake, the historian of York, states that Cardinal Wolsey never came nearer to York than Cawood, which makes good a prophecy of Mother Shipton. "I should not have noticed this idle story," he adds, "but that it is fresh in the mouths of our country people at this day; but whether it was a real prediction, or raised after the event, I shall not take upon me to determine. It is more than probable, like all the rest of these kind of tales, the accident gave occasion to the story." (See *Eboracum*, p. 450, and get date of

it).^[1] In a *History of Knaresborough*, published by Harcourt about a hundred years ago, Mother Shipton's traditional prophecies are described as being still familiar in her native town. The much mutilated sculptured stone near Clifton, Yorkshire, universally called "Mother Shipton," was the figure of a warrior in armour, which had been a recumbent monumental statue; it was probably brought from the neighbouring Abbey of St. Mary, and placed upright as a boundary stone. It has been removed to the museum of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society.

After clearing palpable fiction out of the way, we are left face to face with three of the earliest editions of Mother Shipton's prophecies, published respectively in 1641, 1645, and 1663. These agree closely with each other in their details, the variations being few and unimportant. They appear to have been written seriously and with a desire for truth, in which they differ marvellously from the Shipton literature of the last 200 years.

A critical examination of the oldest record, reprinted in full in Chapter III, reveals indications that the first part was written by one man, and the second part by another; the former was the most able of the two. The latter part consists of Besley's statements, evidently made originally in doggerel verse, but set by the printer, for the most part, in prose. The rhymes can be traced.

Lilly's 1645 version is the best of the three, and it preserves more of Master Besley's rhymes in their original form. For instance, the 1641 edition contains the following lines:—

Then Warres shall begin in the spring,
Much woe to England it shall bring:
Then shall the Ladyes cry well-away,
That ever we liv'd to see this day.

Lilly's edition gives the following more complete quotation from an older version:—

The North shall rue it wondrous sore,
But the South shall rue it for evermore.
When wars shall begin in the spring
Much wo to England it wild bring:
Then shall the Ladies cry well a-day,
That we ever liv'd to see this day.
Then best for them that have the least
And worst for them that have the most.

Not only is there this internal evidence of the pamphlets being more or less true copies of earlier records, but Lilly, in his *Collection of Ancient and Modern Prophecies*, published in 1645, makes this direct statement in the "introduction to the reader:"—

"Mother Shipton's" [prophecy] "was never yet questioned either for the verity or antiquity; the North of England hath many more of hers."

Did such a person as Mother Shipton ever live? Cardinal Wolsey was at Cawood in 1530, and the earliest record in existence of Mother Shipton, is dated 1641, leaving a gap of 111 years between the chief incident of her career and the oldest record thereof. But Lilly in 1645 speaks of various earlier records of her prophecy being then in existence, and of the facts being in his day undisputed. Some of those older records, which between 1641 and 1663 were reprinted with much fidelity, might possibly have been issued, if not in the lifetime of the sibyl herself, at all events in the lifetime of some of those who dwelt in York when the occurrences took place. After Cardinal Wolsey's death, Mother Shipton told Master Besley to take a jewelled pillar out of York Cathedral and to present it to Henry VIII. It might be asked how Master Besley could do this at the more instigation of an old woman, and without the consent of the Archbishop. But history shows that the See of York was vacant for nearly a year after Cardinal Wolsey's death, so that while it was in the charge of underlings, at a time when Henry VIII began to seize church

property in all directions, this Mr. Besley may have had the power to do what is recorded of him. Besley's name is spelt "Beasley" in Lilly's reprint of the Shipton prophecy, and I find in Drake's *Eboracum* that in the year 1486 a John Beasley was one of the Sheriffs of York. The admirer of Mother Shipton may have been his son; at all events people of that name *were* living in York before the incident with Cardinal Wolsey is said to have occurred.

In 1539, Richard Layton, Dean of York, pawned some of the jewels of the Cathedral, which is a corroborative illustration of the treatment of church property at that period.

Not so very long after the event, then, a clear record of the interview of Mother Shipton with the three lords found its way into print, and the writer lengthened the narrative by tacking some of Master Besley's doggerel verses to the end of it. If there were no truth in the story, it was one which would have given much offence to the immediate descendants of the noblemen whose names had been so freely used in public.

Lilly, as already stated, makes no question that Mother Shipton existed, and says that in his time the authenticity of her prophecies was undisputed. He had means, which we in modern times have not, of drawing a conclusion, and altogether it is tolerably certain that Mother Shipton had an actual existence.

1. The date of Drake's *Eboracum* is 1736—W.H.H.

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