

# Mother Shipton investigated/Chapter 6

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## Chapter Sixth.

THE MOTHER SHIPTON OF ART—AN EARLY PICTURE OF MOTHER SHIPTON AND CARDINAL WOLSEY—THE ORIGIN OF "PUNCH"—PUNCH IN ENGLAND AND ITALY—PUPPET-SHOWS—SURVIVAL OF MOTHER SHIPTON IN MR. PUNCH OF FLEET STREET—MOTHER SHIPTON IN WESTMINSTER ABBY—A KICKING EFFIGY OF MOTHER SHIPTON IN FLEET STREET—MOTHER SHIPTON'S SKULL—A CURIOUS PICTURE OF MOTHER SHIPTON AT STILTON—MOTHER SHIPTON IN SCOTLAND.

The cover of the earliest pamphlet extant in relation to Mother Shipton, namely, that dated 1641, has a coarsely executed alleged likeness of her on the front page. The artist seems to have had no deliberate intention to make her specially ugly; she has no hooked nose, hump, or abnormal dress. The portrait would equally well have done for Queen Elizabeth or any other respectable woman of about Mother Shipton's time.

The 1663 pamphlet has a picture of a more dramatic nature, on the front page. An accurate copy of it is given in the engraving printed upon page eight herein. In this cut Cardinal Wolsey, suitably attended, is represented on Cawood Tower, viewing York Minster in the distance, In front of the tower and larger than that edifice, is Mother Shipton uplifting her hand in an attitude of warning, whilst down in the right-hand corner is a portrait of "Mr. Saltmarsh," emerging from an uncomfortably small tent, which he has been clever enough not to ignite with the blazing torch he is bringing from its limited recesses. King Henry VIII is represented in the left hand lower corner of the cut.

Mr. Saltmarsh was a native of "Yilford" in Essex. On the 4th of December, 1647, he told his wife that he had a mission from God to make known to the army what the Lord had revealed unto him. He procured a horse, made his way to Windsor, where "without any respect" he announced to various officers and military authorities that evil days were in store for the army, and "that God was purposed to destroy the wicked, and draw the Saints to Himself." The chronicler adds, "Some said that he looked like one distracted, and that he had been sick and was not well recovered," which Mr. Saltmarsh denied. Having fulfilled his mission he returned home. "On Friday, Decem. 10th, he said he had finished his course, and must goe to his Father, In the afternoone he said his Head aked: and laid himselfe upon his Bed. On *Saturday*, Decemb. 11, hee was taken speechlesse, and about 4 or five of the clock in the afternoon Dyed." So ends the sad story of an unbalanced psychical sensitive.

The Mother Shipton depicted in this cut, in several respects bears a striking resemblance to Mr. Punch of Fleet Street; they may be seen face to face in the frontispiece to this work. The points of resemblance are—(1) The hooked nose and chin. (2) The peaked cap. (3) The hump. (4) The dress with prominent lines. (5) The uplifted hand. (6) The grasping of a weapon with the other hand. (7) Each of them faces an important individual in a peculiar cap, perched upon an elevated structure—Cardinal Wolsey in the one instance; Toby in the other.

The first volume of *Punch* was issued in 1841, and in the first article admits its ruling personality to be derived from the Punch of the puppet-shows. The front page of the first number represents Punch in his little street theatre, hanging the Devil, who in the agonies of strangulation, with his tongue lolling out, seems loth to drop his pitchfork from his weakened hand. Nine years previously, in January, 1832, a comic weekly paper, *Punchinello*, had been started in the same office, 13, Wellington Street, Strand, but expired with the issue of its tenth number. Punchinello was represented with the nose of the modern Punch, but he had no bump or peaked cap.

The origin of Punch is veiled in obscurity. The general belief of the few writers on the subject is that Silvio Fiorillo invented Pulcinella about the year 1600, and introduced him into the staff of theatrical buffoons at Naples. Quadrio in his *Storia d'ogni Poesia*, would spell the name "*Pullicinello*" from Pulliceno or "turkey-cock," an allusion to the beak of that bird. Baretti has it Pulcinella, or "hen-chicken," whose cry is said to resemble the voice of Punch. The earliest record in relation to the existence of Punch in England is perhaps in the *Tatler* newspaper of July 21st, 1709.

George Cruikshank and a colleague wrote thus about the origin of the English puppet-show Punch:—

The great exhibitor of Punch immortalised, we will say, by Steele, notwithstanding the disesteem into which that delightful writer has fallen, is Mr. Powell; and in No. 44 of the *Tatler*, Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq., complains that he had been abused by Punch in a Prologue, supposed to be spoken by him, but really delivered by his master, who stood behind, "worked the wires," and, by "a thread in one of Punch's chops," gave to him the appearance of enunciation. These expressions are important inasmuch as they show a method of performance and a degree of intricacy in the machinery not now known. At present the puppets are played only by putting the hand under the dress, and making the middle finger and thumb serve for the arms, while the fore-finger works the head . . . . Powell's show was set in Covent Garden, opposite to St. Paul's Church; and the *Spectator* (No. 14<sup>[1]</sup>) contains the letter of the sexton, who complained that the performances of Punch thinned the congregation in the Church, and that, as Powell exhibited during the time of prayers, the tolling of the bell was taken, by all who heard it, for notice of the intended commencement of the exhibition.<sup>[2]</sup>

Many particulars about Powell are stated in "A Second Tale of a Tub: or the History of Robert Powell, the Puppet showman," London: 1715. The frontispiece gives a picture of the exhibition, in which Punch is represented in a sugar loaf hat, with no hooked nose or chin; a front view of him being given, no hump is visible. This portrait would not now be recognised as a likeness of Punch; it does not nearly so much resemble him as does the 1663 portrait of Mother Shipton, now first brought face to face with her lively relative.

Celebrated contributors to *Punch*, have speculated that as it was recorded in 1715 that "the Dutch were the most expert nation in the world for puppet-shows," probably puppet-shows and Punch were brought to England when King William came over from Holland in 1688, twenty-one years before the earliest record of his advent.

But in the Punch-like likeness of Mother Shipton published in 1663, are several of the characteristic features of Punch, indicating his existence in England twenty-five years fore the supposed advent. Perhaps his features or have been handed down from time immemorial in English puppet-shows, but whether under the name of Mother Shipton, Mr. Punch, or somebody else, there is no evidence to show.

Some writers suppose Punch to be a survival of the Pontius Pilate of the Miracle Plays. A writer in *Notes and Queries*, Dec. 18th, 1869, "had reason to believe that 'Punch' was of Italian origin, drawing his name 'Ponchinello' from a mystery-play, wherein figured Pontius Pilate, Judas (Judy), and perhaps Tobias, otherwise Toby the dog."

Charles Mac Farlane, in his *Recollections of the South of Italy* (London: 1846), suggests that, as puppet plays and a kind of Punch are found all over the world, Punch had probably several distinct origins, at different times, in different countries. This is very likely, because a caricaturist who wished to distort the human form, would naturally seize upon that prominent feature, the nose, and pull it, then draw out the chin, and by a very little exercise of original genius, add a bump.

But the resemblance of Mother Shipton to Mr. Punch of Fleet Street extends not alone to these points, but to attitude and to dress: hence in ancient times there apparently must have been some bond of union between the two celebrities. Have I succeeded in restoring an affectionate son to his long lost mother, or is Mr. Punch none other than Mother Shipton herself, cunningly disguised? Every boy knows that except when he is singing a song of triumph, Mr. Punch's squeal does not reveal the nature of his emotions, rage and pleasure provoking from him the same squeak. Hence, if Mr. Punch first learns from these pages that his disguise in male attire is discovered, so that he squeals with rage, or if it be that he finds himself restored to his long lost

Reverend Mother, consequently squeaks with pleasure, wild noises, calculated to frighten cab horses and to make pedestrians turn pale, may be expected to be heard issuing from the Fleet Street Office for three or four days after the publication of this book, but by a little carefully planned assistance from Scotland Yard, street accidents may be prevented. As Ingoldsby might have said:—

And we shall hear his song of fear, and shrillest squeal and squeak,  
Come from his Fleet Street counting house for nearly half a week—  
For three long days and three long nights, list to those sounds of fear,  
When Punch's wails will cease to rend the listening public ear.

In the absence of evidence as to the origin of the physical frame of the English Punch, perhaps as good a speculation as any may be that in the English puppet-shows of the olden time were one or more conventional figures which were ordinarily used for comic work, their dresses being slightly altered to suit the particular character represented. Economy would naturally bring this to pass. A figure with a hooked nose and hump might have been Mother Goose one day, and somebody else the next; thus, when Punchinello proper came from Italy, his figure may have been already here, as depicted in the portrait of Mother Shipton engraved in 1663. The minds of the artists in former times, who drew rough pictures of celebrities for engraving, would be likely to limn them as they were commonly exhibited to the public. However this may have been, one fact is clear, namely, that in the Punch of to-day are the leading characteristics of Mother Shipton's portrait engraved in 1663; so

Though mountains crack from base to crown, Though empires wax and wane,  
Though Mother Goose be no more seen, Though chaos come again—  
Though Goody Twoshoes fade for aye, Though perish Mother Bunch,  
Good Mother Shipton still will live In dear old Mr. Punch.

A wax effigy of Mother Shipton stood in Westminster Abbey<sup>[3]</sup> until a somewhat recent date. Wax effigies of other noted dead persons were once exhibited there, including Edward VI, Queen Elizabeth, James I, Oliver Cromwell, King William, Queen Mary, Queen Anne, and others. They were richly robed, and formed one of the sights of London, known to the public as "The Play of the Dead Volks," and later still, after the dresses had become ragged and dilapidated, as "The Ragged Regiment", What remained of this collection was removed in 1839.

A correspondent sent to *Notes and Queries* of March 17th, 1866, the somewhat illogical argument that because an effigy of Mother Shipton had been exhibited in Fleet Street, therefore none was exhibited in Westminster Abbey. The following are his or her words:—

Mother Shipton was a conspicuous object among the wax figures, not in Westminster Abbey, but in Mrs. Salmon's once popular exhibition in Fleet Street. She was an especial favourite with the juvenile visitors, as she used to put out her leg and kick the shins of anyone who approached her near enough.—A.Pr.

Mr. Edward Hailstone, of Horton Hall, writes to *Notes and Queries* of September 11th, 1879:—

In the catalogue of Rackstraw's Museum, exhibited in Fleet Street, London, 1792, is this paragraph—"A figure of Mother Shipton, the prophetess, in which the lineaments of extreme old age are strongly and naturally marked. Also her real skull, brought from her burial place at Knaresborough, in Yorkshire."

The painter in oil colours has felt the attractions of the subject, for a writer in *Notes and Queries* of Aug. 1st, 1868, says that until within a few years of that date, a large painting of her and the fulfilment of one of her prophecies hung up in the large room of the old Crown and Woolpack Inn, on the Great North Road, Conington Lane, near Stilton.

A sensational engraving of Mother Shipton in a chariot drawn by a reindeer or a stag appeared in *The Wonderful Magazine*, (London: Alex. Hogg, 16, Paternoster Row) 1793, Vol. II, page 225. It is prefixed to a tale woven out of the Mother Shipton history fabricated by Head. The author transfers the scene of much of her life to Melrose. Other attempts have been made to transplant Mother Shipton. The inhabitants of Winslow-cum-Shipton, in Buckinghamshire, have claimed her, and in the traditional lore of East Norfolk she is made to prophecy that

"The town of Yarmouth shall become a nettle-bush. That the bridges shall be pulled up; and small vessels sail to Irstead and Barton Loads." Also, "Blessed are they that live near Potter Heigham, and double-blessed them that live in it."<sup>[4]</sup>

1. Attributed to Steele.
2. See *Punch and Judy*. by Payne Collier and George Cruikshank: Bell and Daldy. London: 1870.
3. *Romance of London*, by John Timbs, F.S.A. Vol. II, page 284. London: Bentley, 1865.
4. *Norfolk Archæology*, Vol. II. Norwich: Charles Musket, Old Haymarket, 1849.

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