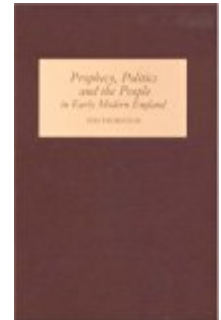


**Tim Thornton.** *Prophecy, Politics and the People in Early Modern England.*

Woodbridge and Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 2006. x + 269 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84383-259-1.



**Reviewed by** Owen Davies

**Published on** H-Albion (October, 2008)

**Commissioned by** Brian S. Weiser (Metropolitan State College of Denver)

The role of prophecy in the political and religious cultures of medieval and early modern England has received a fair degree of attention since the publication of Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971). Several major studies have appeared on astrology and almanacs (Patrick Curry's *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England* [1989] and Bernard Capp's *Astrology and the Popular Press: English Almanacs, 1500-1800* [1979]), on seventeenth-century female visionaries (Phyllis Mack's *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* [1992]), late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Radical prophets (Margery A. Kingsley's *Transforming the Word: Prophecy, Poetry, and Politics in England, 1650-1742* [2001]), and providentialism (Alex Walsham's *Providence in Early Modern England* [2001] and William E. Burns's *An Age of Wonders: Prodigies, Politics, and Providence in England, 1657-1727* [2002]). Tim Thornton's scrupulously researched book on vernacular non-Biblical prophecy fills a significant gap in this historiography by focusing on the

publication history of two of the most influential, albeit fictitious, sources of prophetic literature, Mother Shipton and the Cheshire prophet. The book is as much about those who printed and published the many polemical and populist examples of the genre as about those who wrote them. Despite the problem of limited sources, Thornton also provides interesting insights regarding the readership of this literature.

The first chapter concentrates on the political influence of "ancient" prophecies concerning Welsh, Scottish, and English relations during the reign of Henry VIII. While texts containing the utterances of the mythical Merlin began to appear in print, Thornton emphasizes the importance of manuscript and oral prophecies at this time. Concern about their destabilizing effect on court loyalties and national perceptions was sufficient for Henry to produce a statute against prophecy in 1542, which made it a treasonable offence. It was instituted to deal with the likes of Robert Dalyvell of Royston who was investigated for repeating

prophecies he had heard from Scotsmen that their king would be crowned king of England within three years. As the next chapter shows, tensions between Scotland and England continued to foster a prophetic political culture during the next century and beyond.

As has been well documented, the importance of prophecy and astrology surged during the period of the British Civil War. It was at this time that new prophetic traditions were born, none more enduring than that regarding the legendary early sixteenth-century Yorkshire prophetess Mother Shipton, the history of which Thornton traces right through to the twentieth century in the fourth chapter. *The Prophecie of Mother Shipton* first appeared in 1641, and as Thornton skillfully demonstrates, it and subsequent editions provide useful insights into the developing popular understanding of the past and the future.

In the early eighteenth century, the predictions of Merlin continued to inspire the creative juices of political propagandists, and the legend of Mother Shipton began to percolate into popular culture, but the real star of the time was Nixon the Cheshire prophet. The literary legend of this oracular ploughboy was set in the time of Henry VII, and among his predictions were the dissolution of the monasteries and the battle of Bosworth. But the prophecy that inspired most interest in the early eighteenth century was that England was to suffer imminent invasion. Thornton produces evidence that predictions attributed to a prophet named Nixon were circulating orally before the first publication dedicated to his life and utterances was printed around 1713. He then goes on to piece together why *The Cheshire Prophecy* and subsequent versions were printed at that particular moment, and makes a convincing argument that it was produced as pro-Whig propaganda at a time when the Jacobite rebellion of 1715 was fomenting. The Oldmixon edition of the prophecy tellingly also went through at least seven editions in 1745.

It is in these discussions on Nixon and Shipton that the major strength of Thornton's approach comes to the fore, namely the detailed situating of these prophetic publications in a regional and local context. Nixon's prophecies concerned locations and events in Cheshire as well as national ones, and Thornton goes into considerable detail regarding the seventeenth-century history of the county to understand why "Nixon's prophecy was transformed from being a simple Cheshire tradition to a story of national political significance" (p. 121). The "sense of place" underpinning Mother Shipton's enduring success developed fully in relation to the development of the Yorkshire spa towns of Knaresborough and Harrogate during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Although the volume of footnotes sometimes dominates a little too much, Thornton presents a huge amount of detail in a clear and readable manner. The book provides fresh insights that will benefit both early modern social and political historians and those interested in the influence of popular literature and tradition in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

P

st

D

really

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

**Citation:** Owen Davies. Review of Thornton, Tim. *Prophecy, Politics and the People in Early Modern England*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. October, 2008.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=22861>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.