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MERLIN AND HULL: A SEVENTEENTH CENTURY PROPHECY

ROGER SIMPSON

Though prophecy is, as George Eliot observed,¹ the most gratuitous form of mistake, Britain has never lacked aspirants to the mantic role, and the time-dishonoured tradition of political prophecy has remained a cultural staple in this country from, at least, medieval times to the present, when it has entered upon a virulent form.

As the urge to haruspicate or scry is exacerbated in times of national distress, the events of the mid-seventeenth century provided ideal circumstances for soothsaying activity, which often took the particular form of "ancient prophecy" (Thomas 389). This genre usually combined two characterising features: it was elusively vague and, although not resting upon any clearly defined magical or religious foundation, it was attributed nonetheless to some historical or mythical authority. Among these authorities, Bede and Thomas Becket commonly figured, but the most favoured of all was Merlin.

Merlin's enduring fame was directly attributable to Geoffrey of Monmouth, whose *Prophetiae Merlini* had paraphrased some of the early Welsh Myrddin material besides augmenting it with very much more of Geoffrey's own apparent making. Included in Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1138), one of the most widely influential of all literary works, the *Prophetiae* promoted Merlin's reputation, quite independently of the Arthurian legend, as a cryptic forecaster of dynastic and apocalyptic upheavals. In the early seventeenth century his repute in these directions was given a fresh impetus by the publication of new editions of his prophecies in 1603 and 1608, and then by Thomas Heywood's *The Life of Merlin* (1641), a work that was, in fact, much less concerned with the biography than with the political forecasts of the sage. With the benefit of hindsight, Heywood provided an account that he claimed was Merlin's own prophecy, and which accurately foretold the course of English history up to the coronation of King Charles I. At that point, Heywood wisely paused.

Although the blessing of Merlin had traditionally been invoked by Tudor apologists, and although the Roman Catholic Church had officially discountenanced appeals to Merlin's power of divination by placing him

on the Index (Thomas 408), his reputation remained widespread, with the result that no single group could wholly monopolise his authority in the mid-seventeenth century. Both Royalists and Parliamentarians might therefore lay claim to him as a propaganda weapon in the verbal skirmishing that was fought through the medium of political pamphleteering.² A year after Heywood's *Life* appeared, the outbreak of hostilities in Yorkshire provided the occasion for Merlin's admonitory intervention on the Royalist side. Included in a pamphlet printed in London on 12 August 1642 was a forty-eight-line poem entitled *Merlin's Prophesie of Kingstone upon Hull*, a work which was clearly based on the happenings of that spring and summer.³

Charles's sharp discords with his Parliamentary opponents were reaching such a critical stage that armed conflict seemed likely.⁴ For both sides, the town of Hull appeared an invaluable prize in the event of war as it was a key port on the east coast, could easily be defended, and housed a substantial magazine of arms that had been deposited there in preparation for the attempted invasion of Scotland in 1640. In March 1642 Charles abandoned London, moved into the north of England and made the city of York his base. On 23 April he tried to visit Hull, where there was a sizeable Royalist faction, but, acting in the name of Parliament, the governor barred the gates, closed the drawbridges against him, and Charles was obliged to withdraw crestfallen after an important symbolic rebuff. Because the surrounding areas were, however, still predominantly Royalist, the continuing adherence of Hull to the Parliamentary cause was considered precarious: consequently the magazine was shipped for London in the following month, while King and Parliament wrangled over its control. In July, the Royalists duly laid siege to the town but their attempt was unsuccessful, largely because the town's garrison had cut the river banks so as to flood the approaches. This made it virtually impossible to capture Hull as long as Parliament controlled the sea, and by the end of the month the siege had been raised. His authority having been openly flouted, Charles was drawn into a declaration of war; on 22 August he raised his standard at Nottingham, and the Civil War formally moved into its opening phase.

Issued in the interval between the conclusion of the siege and the proclamation at Nottingham, *Merlin's Prophesie of Kingstone upon Hull* appears to consist of a thinly-veiled warning by way of an historical review that summarises the town's development from its very humble beginnings as "a sheepe cote" or "sheepfold" (lines 3, 27)⁵ to a walled town made prosperous by the shipping trade, an increase in prosperity

signalled by its change of name from Lowman to Kingston.⁶ Presumably, the “pride and mischief” (line 20) hubristically evinced by the exclusion of the King from what had once been a specifically royal town will be met with divine retribution, no man will be left alive within, and the walls that have insulted the sovereign will be levelled with the ground.

Whereas many other contemporary prophecies, such as the presbyterian John Vicar’s *Prodigies and Apparitions* and William Lilly’s *A Prophecy of the White King*⁷ employed highly-wrought metaphorical language made obscurer by an impenetrably-coded animal-symbolism, the Hull prophecy remains rather prosaic, in key with its shambling metrical patterns and limply incohesive sentence structures. Its sole excursion into fanciful symbolism is the reference to the “Lilly” which will beat and wound the town. Such an enigmatic utterance is, of course, one distinguishing technique of a carefully contrived “ancient prophecy,” which combines apparently successful forecasting on a minor detail which could reasonably be inferred, such as the flooding of Myton,⁸ with deliberate ambiguity about major events that will ensue. Thus, while the Lilly would probably be taken as a reference to Charles—who was commonly known as The White King—its indeterminacy would prove a useful hedge in many other eventualities. The second distinguishing technique—appeal to revered authority—is here made very manifest; for not only is the prophecy warranted by Merlin, but it is also vouched for by a wide range of cited luminaries (it is probable that Thomas the Rhymer of Erceldoune, the Venerable Bede, William Wallace and John Bale are intended) and “other moe” who remain undesignated.⁹

Despite these assertions, the prophecy does not, so far, seem to have been very adequately fulfilled. While it is true that the economy of the town of Hull was severely disrupted by a second siege in October 1643, the populace and the buildings remained relatively unscathed. The fourteenth-century walls were finally to be demolished in 1804, but the town was to develop peacefully and prosperously into Victorian times and beyond. Having become a city in 1897, Hull as yet displays no reliable indication of the death prophesied by Merlin.

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MERLIN'S PROPHEISIE OF KINGSTONE UPON HULL

LOWMAN, LOWNAM, thou mayst well rejoyce,
 So soone to be changed as thou shalt be;
 From a Sheepe cotes name the game foes
 Unto a goodly Towne as men shall see.
 Thy name shall be called to a high Degree 5
 And 'come a *Kings towne*, so shall be thy Name:
 Upon *Hull* water set shalt thou bee:
 Yet take heed to thy selfe for fear of blame.
 But now poore *Myton*, thou standest well
 Upon *Humber* banke, but what is thy end; 10
 Lye even in *Humber* so thou shalt every dell,
 Thou canst in no wise thy selfe from it defend.
Kingston upon Hull, *Lowman* was thy Name,
 A walled Towne thou art, so long as thou shalt stand;
 By reason of Shipping thou art in good fame, 15
 But woe to thy end, for MERLIN saith the same.
 Thy Wals & towres with Pinacles, so high in thy time
 Of troubles, they shall not thee defend:
 Nor Forts to be made, this doe I well finde;
 For thy Pride and mischief God will thee sorrow send. 20
 What availeth thee, thy walls repugning against God,
 God know'th from the beginning, what thou shalt be,
 If yet thou hadst bin *Lowman* and used thy Trade,
 Thou shouldest have stood still without Walls surely.
 Now it is a pleasure for thee to behold, 25
 They Shippes from beyond the Seas,
 Yet hadst thou been better to have been a sheepfold,
 As was thy beginning, as *Merlin* doth prophecie;
 For he saith surely, thou shalt be sore beat,
 And even with the ground thou shalt be laid plaine, 30
 The day, time, and houre, God hath thee set,
 That in thee shall be left no man to remaine.
 By the Lilly thou shalt be sore beat,
 For *Humber* with Shippes shall be all full,
 And by the same Lilly thou shalt be so wounded, 35
 And then blame the time that thou wast call'd *Hull*;
 And yet the Ships of the Lilly shall still yours remain
 And stand in *Humber* the truth for to say,

The cause of warres is oft times sodaine,
 When they were to go home they must needs stay. 40
 Their Mariners shal want that brought the from home,
 And few be left alive of the men of warre,
 Their Souldiers and Captaines shall be all gone
 Which they brought with them from Countries far.
 Thou *Hull* and thy Enemies shall dye together; 45
 For *Urta* of *Seladowne*, and *Wallis* also
 Doth speake the same Prophecie all together,
 With *Bede*, and *Bell*, and *Merlin*, with other moe.

NOTES

¹ *Middlemarch*, book 1, chapter 10.

² The astrologer William Lilly (1602-1681), who favoured the Parliamentary side, published the first of his annual almanacs in June 1644 under the title of *Merlinus Anglicus Junior, the English Merlin Reviv'd*. For his regular use of the Merlin pseudonym, see Parker, *Familiar to All: William Lilly and Astrology in the Seventeenth Century*

³ It was printed in a pamphlet along with the anonymous *A Signe from Heaven: or, A Fearefull and Terrible Noise heard in the Ayre at Alborow in the County of Suffolk. A Signe from Heaven* has been reprinted by Meg Smith in *Aldeburgh and Around. Merlin's Prophesie*, however, seems not to have been reprinted.

⁴ For historical background, I have drawn information from Gillett and MacMahon, *A History of Hull*; Hibbert, *Charles I*; and Reckitt, *Charles the First and Hull, 1639-1645*.

⁵ The nearby early Danish settlement of Sculcoates may be alluded to.

⁶ Although a part of the town was, and is, called Lowgate, there seems no evidence of the town having been called Lowman. The early name was Wyke; it became Kingston-upon-Hull in 1293 when King Edward I acquired direct control. The "Lowman, Lownam" of line 1, if it is not a misprint, may be a punning allusion to the sixteenth century Richard Laynam (sometimes spelt Layman and Latham) who spake prophetically in Wiltshire and London of Merlin, the Lilly and the Mouldwarp (Thomas 401).

⁷ See Harry Rusche, "Prophecies and propaganda, 1641 to 1651."

⁸ Much of the abbey land at Myton to the west of Hull collapsed into

the Humber in 1253 and was never recovered.

⁹ Prophecies attributed to Thomas of Erceldoune were published in 1603 and 1615. He was said to have been a close friend of Sir William Wallace. Bishop John Bale claimed that Merlin had predicted the Protestant Reformation (Thomas 408). The fact that the poet's spelling of these names is unorthodox, even by the tolerant standards of the earlier seventeenth century, suggests that the author was not very conversant with the written forms.

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