

## XIV

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**A border to the unknown: folk ritual and interpretations of astrological phenomena in Edmond Halley's *A Description of the Passage of the Shadow of the Moon over England* (1723) and James Catnach's almanac, *The Prophetic Messenger* (1833)**

Halley's widely circulated broadside presents one of the earliest rational analyses of a solar eclipse. In it, the Enlightenment scientist attempts to pre-empt the superstitious interpretations that often accompanied astrological occurrences. A century later, an anonymously published broadside and image, *The Prophetic Messenger* depicts an anarchic, folkloric view of a comet visible over Britain. What do these wildly different interpretations tell us about folk ritual in the post-Enlightenment era? In both, the sky represents a border into the unknown; it is either a mappable terrain that can be conquered by rational thought, or a space where folk custom breaks down and fragments into disparate images. Do these representations intersect in any other ways? By examining these artefacts side by side, we can see a variation in cultural attitudes and popular belief amongst different communities, and how supernatural interpretations of natural phenomena were borne out of a reaction to social change.

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In the basement of the Tyne and Wear archives, amongst a curious collection of scrapbooks, folk songs and photographs, avant-folk musician Richard Dawson captured *The Prophetic Messenger* in song as a relentlessly unnerving trudge through the countryside of northeast England. A 'scream' from the sky introduces an ominous 'great ball of fire' that hurtles over death, famine and destruction on the landscape below.<sup>1</sup> Commenting on the artefacts in the collection, Dawson remarked on the 'people living at a different point in time from us. At first they seem so far away but after a short while they begin to move closer.'<sup>2</sup> This interaction between people, place and period is broadly speaking, the framework I have followed in understanding the changing ways in which 'high' and 'low' audiences shared and appropriated ideas on the natural world, and formed different interpretations of astrological phenomena. Alongside the rather intense displays of portentous folkloric tropes in *The Prophetic Messenger*, Edmond Halley's rational, Enlightenment study of an early eighteenth-century solar eclipse, *A*

<sup>1</sup> Richard Dawson, 'The Ghost of a Tree' on, *The Glass Trunk*, LP, alt.vinyl, r4529490, (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Tyne and Wear archives, *Half Memory: Richard Dawson - The Glass Trunk*, <<https://twmuseums.org.uk/half-memory/richard-dawson-the-glass-trunk/>>, [Accessed 29 January 2017].

*Description of the Passage of the Shadow of the Moon over England*,<sup>3</sup> attempts to engage with the framework of popular ritual and lore in its scientific explanation of the appearance and reoccurrence of comets. Presented alongside each other, *The Prophetic Messenger* and Halley's broadside seem the very antithesis in content, audience and systems of belief. Their focus on borders, boundaries and division is what makes this comparison far less straightforward, and far more interesting.



Figure 1. 'Isti mirant stella', Detail from *The Bayeux Tapestry* (c.1077) Bayeux Museum

Until the middle of the seventeenth century, all members of society accepted unexplained apparitions in the sky quite widely as portents or omens of future events. The periodicity of comets and eclipses made it easier to project onto them the fears and expectations of the time: empires, dynasties and warfare, could all be traced back to the appearance of something strange in the sky. A panel of the Bayeux tapestry records the apparition of what would come to be known as 'Halley's Comet' in April 1066 (Figure 1). This was later regarded by many as an omen on the death of King Harold and the beginning of the Norman dynasty in England. The difference in tone between Saxon and Norman observations of the comet is one of the earliest recorded examples of astrology used for propaganda.<sup>4</sup> While post-Enlightenment scholarship discouraged attaching a prophetic meaning to cosmic apparitions, the appearance of 'Norman Yoke' theories and other dubious forms of historicist propaganda merely replaced one 'ignorant' system of belief with another.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Title abbreviated to *A Description* from here on.

<sup>4</sup> O Brazell, 'Astronomical observations in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', *Journal of the British Astronomical Association*, (1991) 101, 117-118, (p. 118).

<sup>5</sup> Philip Connell, 'British Identities and the Politics of Ancient Poetry in Later Eighteenth-Century England', *The Historical Journal*, (2006) 49, 161-192, (p. 182).

One similarity between both artefacts is their form. Both are examples of popular print, and this inexpensive and unregulated medium could combine ‘low’ forms of culture, such as familiar tropes from popular lore, with classical or philosophical topoi.<sup>6</sup> These ‘cultural and intellectual alloys’ produced by an intermingling of ‘high’ and ‘low’ systems of belief prevented the decline of superstition in popular discourse.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 2. Detail from *The Bayeux Tapestry* (c.1077) Image: Wikimedia Commons

Halley’s 1715 publication of *A Description* was the first recorded eclipse map to be published, and produced at a time when astronomy was still recovering from its ‘vulgar’ appropriation during the English Civil War as a prophetic tool.<sup>8</sup> By combining the accessibility of the broadside form with the established reputation of scientific publisher John Senex, Halley was able to exploit a growing culture of commercialism in eighteenth-century Britain, using it to align his discipline with reputable Enlightenment ideas. We know that Halley’s commercial venture was a success because his eclipse map was published again in 1723, with more accurate calculations. Writings by Halley during the time in between the two publications reveal a great deal about the audience he was hoping to attract with his findings:

The Novelty of the thing being likely to excite a general Curiosity ... with a Request to the Curious to observe what they could about it ... as requiring no other Instrument as a Pendulum Clock with which most persons are furnish’d.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Angela McShane, “‘Ne sutor ultra crepidam’”: Political Cobblers and Broadside Ballads in Late Seventeenth-Century England’, in *Ballads and Broad-sides in Britain 1500-1800*, eds. Patricia Fumerton and Anita Guerrini, (Farnham: Ashgate: 2013), p. 226.

<sup>7</sup> Sara J. Schechner, *Comets, Popular Culture, and the Birth of Modern Cosmology*, (Princeton University Press: 1999), p. 218.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>9</sup> Edmond Halley, ‘Observations of the late Total Eclipse of the Sun’, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, (London: 1715).

Language like ‘novelty’ and ‘curiosity’ point to a culture of leisure and ephemera amongst the burgeoning middle classes and the example of the pendulum clock, not an inexpensive item, is telling. ‘Most persons’ in this era would still have relied on the sun and their everyday ritual to perceive time.

Halley was aware and eager to cultivate this attitude of exclusivity. In the late seventeenth century, he had calculated the reoccurrence of his eponymous comet with remarkable accuracy. The comet’s relatively short cycle and good visibility meant it was viewed by many and, consequently, it was linked to several significant and largely negative events. Allied to this, Halley initially made no secret of his acknowledgment of popular lore within astronomy, viewing comets as natural markers of changes in the earth’s atmosphere, which in turn had the potential to enact widespread social or moral change.<sup>10</sup> These observations were challenged in 1694 when the Royal Society censured Halley’s suggestion that a cometary impact may have caused Noah’s Flood.<sup>11</sup> In trying to disentangle astronomy and his own work from popular lore, Halley gives force to his argument by advocating the guiding ideology of the period. When his eclipse maps were published in 1715 and 1723, Halley was clear to reassure readers against observing the eclipse as ‘portending evil to our Sovereign Lord King George and his Government, which God preserve.’<sup>12</sup>

The interaction between politics, astronomy and folklore is subtly reinforced in *A Description*. In 1715 Britain was still a ‘freshly minted state’ which ‘lacked any enduring *raison d’être*.’<sup>13</sup> Custom remained ‘the most powerful legitimating force’ for culture, a sentiment which Halley exploits by stressing the ‘natural’ recurrence of eclipses, in language similar to that describing popular seasonal rituals.<sup>14</sup> He replaces the idea of a community united by populist ideology with his own ‘imagined community’ of ‘many curious individuals’ whose observations of the eclipse he acknowledges and encourages.<sup>15</sup> Halley’s publisher John Senex was a distinguished cartographer and maker of globes; his reputation for accuracy would have added to the intellectual weight of the broadside. Britain is cast in shadow, but the drawing, and the layout of the ballad in general, is geometric, precise and ordered.

<sup>10</sup> Schechner, p. 218.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>12</sup> Edmond Halley in Rebekah Higgitt, ‘Halley’s Eclipse: a coup for Newtonian prediction and the selling of science’, *Guardian*, 3 May 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Colin Kidd, ‘Integration: Patriotism and Nationalism’, in *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. H.T. Dickinson, (John Wiley and Sons: 2005), p. 370.

<sup>14</sup> Bob Bushaway, ‘Popular Culture’ in H.T. Dickinson, p. 344.

<sup>15</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso: 2016), p. 6.



Figure 3. *A Description of the Passage of the Shadow of the Moon over England* (1723)<sup>16</sup>

By contrast, *The Prophetic Messenger* (Figure 4) is full of hostile, ruptured borders, where the sky, detached from the rest of the nation, is open to invasion. The sky has always occupied a significant place in British folklore. A ‘red sky at night’ was to the mutual ‘delight’ of sailors and shepherds everywhere. Folklore in general often provided people with the understanding to utilise the natural world around them. However, the popularity of *The Prophetic Messenger* reveals how the sky also provokes uncertainty well into the nineteenth century. Borders function as one of the most significant tropes in folklore. They not only represent a difference in landscape or nation, but also act as a division between the realms of the natural and the supernatural. Displaced rural communities forced to migrate to industrialised towns and cities at the beginning of the nineteenth century, adapted many of their traditions in line with their new surroundings. The Reverend Herbert James observed that despite the technological and scientific developments throughout the nineteenth century, many of his parishioners preferred to seek out ‘esoteric superstition’.<sup>17</sup> Incidentally James’ son, the acclaimed ghost-writer and antiquarian M.R. James, continued to popularise superstition with his stories of the supernatural, and their particular interest in highly localised popular lore and customs.

<sup>16</sup> Edmond Halley, *A Description of the Passage of the Shadow of the Moon over England*, (John Senex: London: 1723), Houghton Library, Harvard University, EB7 H1552 715d2.

<sup>17</sup> M.R. James: *Ghost Writer*. (BBC Two. 2013).

James Catnach's *The Prophetic Messenger* took its title from a series of popular annualised almanacs of the same name, offering anything from weather forecasts to 'unfortunate days' for the year ahead. As Ian McCalman notes, for Catnach to have produced an inexpensive mimicry 'there must have been considerable demand for the original' and with it, a demonstrable market for its sensational material.<sup>18</sup> Prior to 1833, 'Raphael's' almanacs had run smoothly for thirteen editions, on the pretence that their predictions came from one omnipotent, angelically-named astrologer. It was the ugly transition between the first and second 'Raphael's' that exposed the almanac's methods:

...in order to prevent the public from being so grossly imposed upon, as I understand it is the intention of the two aforesaid young men to write the Prophetic in 1833, for WC Wright, which publication will be said to be written by Raphael! I thought it proper to premise this much, and put the public in possession of the facts, in order to prevent the dissemination of such trash as cannot fail to emanate from the hands of those who have yet to learn their ABC in astrology.<sup>19</sup>

This controversial episode in the popular almanac's history presented a lucrative opportunity for Catnach, who had already built a reputation on parody and libel.<sup>20</sup> As well as being cheaply printed and widely circulated, Catnach's overwhelming image is meant to be entertaining. Its recognisable symbols from popular lore made it accessible enough for display in taverns and working class homes.



Figure 4. *The Prophetic Messenger* (c.1833)<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Ian McCalman, *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1999), p. 721.

<sup>19</sup> Dixon, *Prophetic Messenger*, (London: 1833).

<sup>20</sup> Charles Hindley, *The Life and Times of James Hindley, (late of Seven Dials), Ballad Monger*, (London: Reeves and Turner: 1878).

<sup>21</sup> James Catnach, Tyne and Wear Archives, *The Prophetic Messenger*, c.1833, DX17/1, folio 72.

From within their Enlightenment bubble, Halley and his contemporaries had underestimated the endurance of superstition and ritual in Britain. Halley's comments on the 'natural' occurrence of comets and eclipses would have done little to convince almost three quarters of the population who were illiterate at the time of his publication.<sup>22</sup> Catnach's broadside appears to have exploited the market of its print location in Seven Dials. A notorious slum with significant passing trade in nearby Covent Garden, it was famed for its gin shops, ballad mongers and rapidly increasing Irish population. Charles Hindley notes how James Catnach maintained strong roots with his heritage in the north east of England.<sup>23</sup> Here, a strong and distinctive tradition of popular lore existed in the region between Newcastle and the lowlands surrounding Edinburgh, which placed a particular emphasis on borders and the supernatural. The focus on these themes in *The Prophetic Messenger* (Figure 4), along with Catnach's strong sense of his heritage, shows us that the image is an expression of a certain kind of national and regional identity.



Figure 5. Detail from *The Prophetic Messenger*

Ancient omens of sky snakes, dragons and raining fire are some of the more fantastic additions to what appears to be a statement against the homogenising of popular lore. Hovering on the horizon between these two 'worlds', Catnach places a sinking ship, engulfed in flames. Although Britain's epigraph to 'rule the waves' is not entirely demeaned, the use of this emblem as something symbolic of a united British national identity is certainly undermined. In an attempt to inspire unity at times of foreign warfare, antiquarians looking to demonstrate continuity between the island's Teutonic warrior heritage and its current Hanoverian rulers constructed an invented nationalist history.<sup>24</sup> The undefended British citadel, teetering precariously on a cliff edge behind the ship (Figure 5), is symbolic of the anxieties towards Britain's internal divisions and the attributes that defined its contentious national identity. The appearance of two crowned phantoms pointing out ominously from above the castle's ramparts suggest a rupture between the natural and supernatural worlds.

<sup>22</sup> David Mitch, 'Education and Skill of the British Labour Force,' in Roderick Floud and Paul Johnson, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain, Vol. I: Industrialisation, 1700-1860*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2004), p. 344.

<sup>23</sup> Hindley.

<sup>24</sup> Philip Connell, 'British Identities and The Politics of Ancient Poetry In Later Eighteenth-Century England', *The Historical Journal* (2006) 49, 161-192 (p. 165).

This image is particularly effective as it appeals to both ‘high’ and ‘low’ audiences. The former would recognise the literary allusions to *Hamlet’s* ghost and the implication that ‘something is rotten in the state of Denmark.’<sup>25</sup> For those audiences not familiar with Elizabethan rhetoric, the image of a ghost wearing a crown would certainly have presented itself as an omen, passed down through pre-literate, oral folk tales. Jaqueline Simpson references the use of crowns as ‘convincingly “traditional”- looking’, with the ability to be successfully woven with the “rules of folklore”’.<sup>26</sup> The appearance of the ghosts indicates a nation struggling to repress its unsettled, ‘barbarous’ past, and the endurance of such superstition offers an alternative history to the uncritical narratives of contemporary antiquarianism.

In the bottom right-hand corner of the almanac, Liberty is left undefended after a dragon overpowers a ‘gallant knight’ - one of popular antiquity’s most prominent motifs. The notion of British liberties exposed by the ravages of superstition reveals much about the context in which *The Prophetic Messenger* was produced. Those that still carried superstitions in the post-Enlightenment era largely belonged to the working classes whose access to education and basic literacy was still extremely limited. Significant reform with the Factory Hours Act and the Abolition of Slavery in Britain’s colonies in 1833 proved for many that further change for the least enfranchised in society was possible. Britain’s ‘liberties’ of property ownership and social order were now placed under threat.<sup>27</sup> While the dragon’s position as an airborne creature reclaims the sky as a place of folklore and tradition.

The century separating the publication of *A Description* and *The Prophetic Messenger* is often referred to as a significant period of intellectual progress; a transition between the principles of enlightened scientific thought and their application during the Industrial Revolution. For those that were left behind, access to these ideas was restricted by a widening social and economic ridge, leaving popular lore as a viable and accessible system of belief. As Britain’s railway network was developed later in the nineteenth century, it passed through landscapes and communities irretrievably altered by urbanization. Superficial improvements to infrastructure were achieved at the expense of the erasure of many local customs and histories. The investigation and romanticising of the unknown was a form of escape; uncovering something ‘ancient’ and ‘innate in the country’ that had ‘somehow managed to survive’.<sup>28</sup> The atemporality that folk tradition espouses sometimes keeps the past in quarantine, configuring the disunity between communities and ideologies in spatial terms; the borders between sky and land, the unknown and the known.

<sup>25</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, (New York: Dover Publications: 1992), I. 4. 99.

<sup>26</sup> Jaqueline Simpson, “The Rules of Folklore” in the Ghost Stories of M.R. James’, *Folklore* (1997) 108, 9-18 (p. 13).

<sup>27</sup> Angus Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: ‘Habits of Heart and Mind’*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2015), p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Derek Johnston, ‘Time and Identity in Folk Horror’, in *A Fiend in the Furrows*, (Belfast: Queen’s University Belfast: 2014), pp. 1-10, (p. 1).



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