

Of Prophecies

I MEAN not to speak of divine prophecies; nor of heathen oracles; nor of natural predictions; but only of prophecies that have been of certain memory, and from hidden causes. Saith the Pythonissa to Saul, To-morrow thou and thy son shall be with me. Homer hath these verses:

“ At domus AEneae cunctis dominabitur oris, Et nati natorum, et qui nascentur ab illis.

A prophecy, as it seems, of the Roman empire. Seneca the tragedian hath these verses:

“ —Venient annis
Saecula seris, quibus Oceanus
Vincula rerum laxet, et ingens
Pateat Tellus, Tiphysque novos
Detegat orbis; nec sit terris
Ultima Thule:

a prophecy of the discovery of America. The daughter of Polycrates, dreamed that Jupiter bathed her father, and Apollo anointed him; and it came to pass, that he was crucified in an open place, where the sun made his body run with sweat, and the rain washed it. Philip of Macedon dreamed, he sealed up his wife's belly; whereby he did expound it, that his wife should be barren; but Aristander the soothsayer, told him his wife was with child, because men do not use to seal vessels, that are empty. A phantasm that appeared to M. Brutus, in his tent, said to him, Philippis iterum me videbis. Tiberius said to Galba, Tu quoque, Galba, degustabis imperium. In Vespasian's time, there went a prophecy in the East, that those that should come forth of Judea, should reign over the world: which though it may be was meant of our Savior; yet Tacitus expounds it of Vespasian. Domitian dreamed, the night before he was slain, that a golden head was growing, out of the nape of his neck: and indeed, the succession that followed him for many years, made golden times. Henry the Sixth of England, said of Henry the Seventh, when he was a lad, and gave him water, This is the lad that shall enjoy the crown, for which we strive. When I was in France, I heard from one Dr. Pena, that the Queen Mother, who was given to curious arts, caused the King her husband's nativity to be calculated, under a false name; and the astrologer gave a judgment, that he should be killed in a duel; at which the Queen laughed, thinking her husband to be above challenges and duels: but he was slain upon a course at tilt, the splinters of the staff of Montgomery going in at his beaver. The trivial prophecy, which I heard when I was a child, and Queen Elizabeth was in the flower of her years, was,

“ When hempe is spun

England's done:

whereby it was generally conceived, that after the princes had reigned, which had the principal letters of that word henge (which were Henry, Edward, Mary, Philip, and Elizabeth), England should come to utter confusion; which, thanks be to God, is verified only in the change of the name; for that the King's style, is now no more of England but of Britain. There was also another prophecy, before the year of '88, which I do not well understand.

“ There shall be seen upon a day,
Between the Baugh and the May,
The black fleet of Norway.
When that that is come and gone,
England build houses of lime and stone,
For after wars shall you have none.

It was generally conceived to be meant, of the Spanish fleet that came in '88: for that the king of Spain's surname, as they say, is Norway. The prediction of Regiomontanus,

“ Octogesimus octavus mirabilis annus,

was thought likewise accomplished in the sending of that great fleet, being the greatest in strength, though not in number, of all that ever swam upon the sea. As for Cleon's dream, I think it was a jest. It was, that he was devoured of a long dragon; and it was expounded of a maker of sausages, that troubled him exceedingly. There are numbers of the like kind; especially if you include dreams, and predictions of astrology. But I have set down these few only, of certain credit, for example. My judgment is, that they ought all to be despised; and ought to serve but for winter talk by the fireside. Though when I say despised, I mean it as for belief; for otherwise, the spreading, or publishing, of them, is in no sort to be despised. For they have done much mischief; and I see many severe laws made, to suppress them. That that hath given them grace, and some credit, consisteth in three things. First, that men mark when they hit, and never mark when they miss; as they do generally also of dreams. The second is, that probable conjectures, or obscure traditions, many times turn themselves into prophecies; while the nature of man, which coveteth divination, thinks it no peril to foretell that which indeed they do but collect. As that of Seneca's verse. For so much was then subject to demonstration, that the globe of the earth had great parts beyond the Atlantic, which might be probably conceived not to be all sea: and adding thereto the tradition in Plato's Timaeus, and his Atlanticus, it might encourage one to turn it to a prediction. The third and last (which is the great one) is, that almost all of them, being infinite in number, have been impostures, and by idle and crafty brains merely contrived and feigned, after the event past.