

Ni Prophecy and Portent c.1618-1623

Ni You men of Britaine, wherefore gaze yee so

Notes. This poem is accepted as the work of King James. The appearance of a comet in the late autumn skies of 1618 triggered widespread speculation about its possible providential meaning. Was the “blazeing starr” a sign of God’s displeasure, or a portent of disaster to come? Some predicted war, some a crisis in religion or the death of kings. Some, as James’s verse makes clear, connected the comet to divine disapproval of the King’s attempts to seek a marriage alliance with Spain. James’s poem, with its pointed jibes at the Paul’s Walk newsmongers and at popular credulity, registers royal concern at the political implications of the kind of prophetic talk triggered by the comet’s appearance.

“King James on the blazeing starr: Octo: 28: 1618”

You men of Britaine, wherefore gaze yee so

Uppon an Angry starr, whenh as yee know

The sun shall turne to darknesse, the Moon to blood¹

And then twill be to late for to turne good

O be so happy then while time doth last

As to remember Dooms day is not past

And misinterpret not, with vaine Conceit

The Character you see on Heaven gate.

Which though it bring the world some news from fate

The letters such as no man can translate

And for to guesse at God Almighty’s minde

Where such a thing might Cozen all mankinde

Wherefore I wish the Curious man to keep

His rash Imaginations till he sleepe

Then let him dreame of Famine plague & war

And thinke the match with spaine hath causd this star

Or let them thinke that if their Prince my Minion²

Will shortly chang, or which is worse religion

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And that he may have nothing elce to feare
 Let him walke Pauls,³ and meet the Devills there 20
 And if he be a Puritan,⁴ and scapes
 Jesuites,⁵ salute them in their proper shapes
 These Jealousys I would not have a Treason
 In him whose Fancy overrules his Reason
 Yet to be sure It did no harme, Twere fit 25
 He would be bold to pray for no more witt
 But onely to Conceale his dreame, for there
 Be those that will beleive what he dares feare.

Source. Bodleian MS Rawl. Poet. 84, fol. 72r

Other known sources. *James VI and I* 2.172; Bodleian MS Ashmole 38, p. 45; Bodleian MS Eng. Poet. e.14, fol. 77v; Bodleian MS Eng. Poet. e.97, p. 11; Bodleian MS Malone 19, p. 39; Bodleian MS Smith 17, p. 141; Bodleian MS Tanner 465, fol. 81r; BL Add. MS 3910, fol. 29v; BL Add. MS 30982, fol. 21r; BL MS Harley 791, fol. 61r; BL MS Harley 1221, fol. 75r; BL MS Harley 6038, fol. 19r; CCRO MS CR 63/2/19, fol. 19v; Nottingham MS Portland PW V 37, p. 174; PRO SP 14/104/16; Folger MS V.a.162, fol. 31r; Folger MS V.a.345, p. 143; Huntington MS HM 198, 1.29; Rosenbach MS 239/22, fol. 26v

Nil

¹ *The sun...Moon to blood*: alluding to other astronomical phenomena—eclipses, for example—interpreted by contemporaries as portents and providential signs.

² *their Prince my Minion*: the copy in PRO SP 14/104/16 has “theyr Prince, and Mynion”. The line refers to speculation that the comet signalled the fall or death of the King, and the fall of the royal favourite, Buckingham.

³ *walke Pauls*: to walk Paul’s was to haunt the nave and aisles of St. Paul’s Cathedral (Paul’s Walk) in search of news. St. Paul’s was the centre of political newsmongering in early Stuart London.

⁴ *Puritan*: nickname for the hotter sort of Protestant, used here by the King in its original pejorative sense.

⁵ *Jesuites*: members of the Catholic order, the Society of Jesus, and widely feared by English Protestants as the most militant arm of the Counter-Reformation.
