



Nostradamus: A New Look at an Old Seer

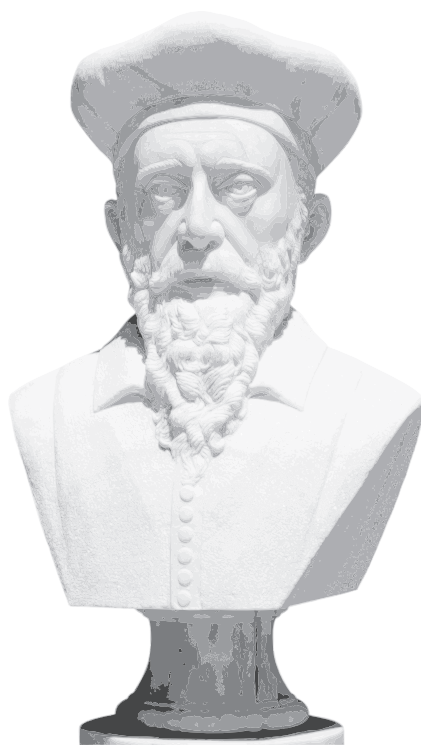
Nostradamus, history's most famous prophesier, continues to fascinate. Claims that he foresaw the rise of Napoleon and of Hitler, among other world events, are being supplemented by assertions that he divined the terrorist strikes of September 11, 2001, and the end-times brouhaha over 2012.

I have taken a fresh look at several of his more famous quatrains, translating them from sixteenth-century French into rhymed English verses—no easy task!

Background

Michele de Notre-Dame (1503–1566), better known by the Latinized *Nostradamus*, was a French physician and astrologer who has been variously described as a scholar, a sorcerer, and a fraud. He became wealthy and honored, especially at the French court where Henry II's queen, Catherine de Medici (1519–1589), was a patron of astrologers and sorcerers.

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Nostradamus's major work was a collection of quatrains (four-line rhyming verses) numbering one thousand and arranged in groups of a hundred called *centuries*. The first 353 quatrains were published in 1555 as *Les Prophéties de M. Michel Nostradamus*, and they were followed by other volumes. The verses'

vague, symbolic language meant that they could be interpreted in different ways in different times, and—by a process known as *retrofitting* (after-the-fact matching)—an event could in hindsight look as if it had been predicted by the supposed seer.

It is sometimes said that Nostradamus wrote in “Old French” (Stray 2009, 264), but that term is reserved for the French language of the ninth to fourteenth centuries. Nostradamus actually wrote in Middle French, which was used in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. (Modern French has been used from the seventeenth century to the present. See *Encyclopedia Britannica* 1960, s.v. “French Language.”) Nostradamus's quatrain lines have ten syllables each and a mid-line pause, or *caesura*, for rhetorical effect. The lines rhyme ABAB. The constraints of this poetic form caused him to engage in various verbal strategies, such as using compressed language, even abbreviations.

Translating Nostradamus is difficult at best, and one who would translate into verse must—like the original versifier—make things fit. I have tried to follow Nostradamus's word choice when possible, but out of necessity I have

occasionally used synonyms, altered the syntax, and made other modifications—including sometimes settling for near rhyme rather than full rhyme.

The Quatrains

Here are ten of Nostradamus's most significant quatrains first given in the original Middle French and then recast into modern English verse and discussed.

1. The Death of King Henry II.

One of Nostradamus's most famous prophecies—number I:35—is also “the verse that made his reputation” (LeVert 1979, 67):

*Le lyon ieune le vieux surmontera,
En champ bellique par singulier duelle,
Dans caige d'or les yeux luy creuera:
Deux classes vne, puis mourir, mort
cruelle.*

My translation:

The young lion shall overcome the
old,
On field of battle by single duel;
He'll smash his eyes with a casing of
gold:
Two fleets one, then to die, a death
cruel.

Published in 1555, this verse is said to predict the accidental death of King Henry II, the quatrain's “old lion.” Reportedly, during a French jousting tournament in 1559, a splinter of a broken lance went through the visor of the King's golden helmet (Nostradamus's “cage of gold”) and thence through his eye into his brain. He subsequently suffered and died “a cruel death” (Roberts 1949, 20).

Alas, the quatrain was clearly not intended to refer to Henry. Just three years after publishing it, in mid-1558, Nostradamus penned a letter to the king, saying that he expected him to live a long life and predicting wonderful things in his future. Moreover, a tournament is not a “field of battle”; the verse refers to “eyes,” plural; and there is no known precedent for a golden helmet (gold is a soft metal), certainly not in the case of Henry (Randi 1993, 175). So Nostradamians are simply retrofitting, attempting to adapt later events to the French seer's murky statements. The same is true of the word *classes*—inter-

preted by some Nostradamians as “wounds” (from Greek *klasis*).¹ (It may mean “classes” or “knells” or—if the word is really the Latin *classis*—“fleets.”) The sense of the verse is that an old leader is slain by a younger one, thus unifying their forces.

2. The Coming of Napoleon. A rather typical Nostradamus quatrain, number I:60, illustrates how very different interpretations can be drawn from a single cryptic verse. Nostradamus (1555) wrote:

*Vn Empereur naistra pres d'Italie,
Qui a l'Empire sera vendu bien cher,
Diront avecques quels gens il se ralie
Qu'on trouuera moins prince que
boucher.*



I translate the rather plain text of quatrain I:60 as follows:

A ruler will be born near Italy,
Whose cost to the Empire shall be
quite dear;
They will say from those whom he
shall rally
That he is less a prince than a butcher.

The phrase “near Italy” covers a lot of ground, from Austria and Corsica to France and Switzerland, and Greece and Yugoslavia. The verse is usually held to refer to Napoleon (1769–1821), but other candidates include the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand II (1578–1637) and even Adolph Hitler (1889–1945). (See LeVert 1979, 80; Randi 1982, 34.)

(Another quatrain [VIII:1] that is also said to refer to Napoleon begins with the three words *Pau, Nay, Oloron*, which are interpreted [Robb 1961, 43–44] as an imperfect anagram [“Nay-pau-lon-Roy”] of *Napoleon Roi* [“King”]. However, Napoleon was not a king, and the words are simply the names of three proximate French towns [Randi 1982, 207–212].)

3. The Rise of Adolph Hitler. Another quatrain, II:24, is said to refer to Adolph Hitler most specifically. Nostradamus (1555) wrote:

*Bestes farouches de faim flueues tranner:
Plus part du camp encontre Hister
sera,
En caige de fer le grand fera treisner,
Quand Rin enfant Germain observera.*

I translate the quatrain provisionally as:

They'll swim the rivers, fiercely fam-
ished brutes:
Most of the army shall range the
Ister;
In an iron cage will be drawn The
Great
When Rhine's child shall Germany
watch over.

Hister is said to denote “Hitler,” and in the late 1930s Nazi propaganda minister Josef Goebbels, whose wife was “an avid Nostradamian,” exploited this and other quatrains that supposedly prophesied France's fall after a German invasion (Hogue 2003, 313).

Hister, or rather *Ister*, is actually an old name for the lower Danube River. The last line of the quatrain is rather confusing, and translators have given many different renderings. Some later texts replaced *Rin* with *Rine* (“the Rhine”) or *rien* (“nothing”). And *Germain* can mean “Germany” or another word of the exact same spelling, i.e., “brother” or “cousin.” And so the verse could read, “When a child [of the] Rhine shall keep watch over his brother” (LeVert 1979, 111), or “When the German child watches the Rhine” (Robb 1961, 47), or “When the German child will observe nothing” (Leoni 1982, 169), or other possibilities. However, because *Hister*, *Rin*, and *Germain* are all capitalized (Nostradamus 1555), thus consistent with proper

names, and also because Nostradamus [III:58] uses *Rin* for “Rhine” elsewhere, I translate the words as “Ister,” “Rhine,” and “Germany.” LeVert (1979, 111) observes that, to Nostradamus’s contemporaries, the “Child of the Rhine” would indicate Charles V (1500–1558).

4. The Great London Fire. This obscure verse—quatrain II:51—has received

Nostradamus’s verse does specifically mention London and people burned. The falling of the “old lady” (*La dame antique*) is said to be “the subsequent falling of the statue of the Virgin from St. Paul’s steeple” (Roberts 1949, 6), though there appears to have been no such statue (Randi 1993, 191). The phrase that translates as “twenty three

Protestants, many of whom were burned at the stake. Her atrocities resulted in her downfall. The word *antique* in the third line usually means “ancient” but can also mean “eccentric” or “senile.” Mary was considered deranged and at her death was incoherent and apparently insane (LeVert 1979, 123–24; Randi 1993, 191–92).

5. A Mysterious Forecast. Among Nostradamus’s cryptic verses is quatrain III:58, which while historically murky is in another sense quite illuminating. The seer wrote (Nostradamus 1555):

*Aupres du Rin des montaignes
Noriques
Naistra vn grand de gents trop tard
venu,
Qui defendra SAVROME &
Pannoniques,
Qu'on ne saura qu'il sera deuenue.*

I translate the quatrain this way:

Close by the Rhine from the Noric
mountains,
A great one’s born of people come
too late.
He’ll defend Saurome and
Pannonians;
It shall not be learned what has been
his fate.

Nostradamus predicts the birth of a “great one” whose people are late arrivers to a region “near the Rhine from the Noric mountains” (the Noric Alps). This leader will defend “Saurome” (as it should be spelled, a Slavic area, now Lithuania) and the “Pannonians” (apparently Hungarians), though his end will be unknown (LeVert 1979; Roberts 1949, 96; Leoni 1982, 611; Hogue 1997, 265–66). Nostradamians are puzzled by the quatrain, although Leoni (1982, 611) suggests an interpretation such that “the prophecy was fulfilled in reverse” and notes that some others have applied the quatrain to Hitler. Less tortuously, Roberts (1949, 96) holds that “it obviously refers to an event and character in his time now lost in the maze of history.”

None of the Nostradamians seems willing to accept the more obvious explanation that Nostradamus was a failed seer. When he says of the “great one” that “it will not be learned what will become of him,” the prognosticator tacitly admits that he, too, is unable to see what the future holds!

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increasing attention, some believing that it forecast the Great Fire of London in 1666. Nostradamus (1555) wrote:

*Le sang du iuste à Londres fera faute
Bruslés par fouldres de vint trois les six.
La dame antique cherra de place
haute:
De mesme secte plusieurs seront occis.*

I translate the quatrain thusly:

Blood of the just in London shall be
scarce,
With twenty three seized, by thunderbolts burned.
The senile lady shall fall from high
place:
Of the same sect many more will be
slain.

the six” (or “sixes”)—three times twenty plus six—could suggest the year ’66.

However, line two is missing a syllable and may be corrupt. Printers of the era sometimes set type as someone read the text aloud (Gaskell 1972, 49, 112–13), so what sounded like *Bruslés par fouldres de vint trois les six* might actually have read, *Bruslés par fouldres plus de vint trois saisis* (“Burned by lightnings, more than twenty-three seized”). In any case, Nostradamian skeptics propose a reasonable explanation of this verse—that it is a contemporaneous reference to Queen Mary Tudor of England (“Bloody Mary” [1516–1558]) and her persecution of



Woodcut of the Great Fire of London

6. Failed Prophecy of Persia. Here is one of Nostradamus's predictions, in quatrain III:77, that gives a specific date of occurrence (Nostradamus 1555):

*Le tiers climat soubz Aries comprins
Lan mil sept cens vingt & sept en
Octobre,
Le roy de Perse par ceux d'Egypte
prins:
Conflict, mort, pte: à la croix grād
opprobe.*

I translate quatrain III:77 as follows:

The third climate, under Aries' list-
ing,
October, seventeen twenty-seven,
Those of Egypt capture the Persian
King.
Conflict, death, loss: the Cross dis-
graced even.

The second line of Nostradamus's astrological forecast is usually understood to give the date as "1727 in October" (Leoni 1982, 213; Robb 1961, 59). However, LeVert (1979, 181), calling attention to the caesura (the mid-line pause common to quatrains), observes that it could be read "one thousand seven hundred [pause] twenty and seven in October," i.e., October 27, 1700, but this seems over-reaching.²

Whatever date in the eighteenth century is chosen, the prophecy is clearly a failed one. Some Nostradamians attempt to interpret the verse's "those of Egypt" as Turks who conquered Egypt in 1517, but as Leoni (1982, 614–15) observes, the Turks "did not, by any stretch of the imagination, capture (or even defeat) the Persian ruler." Neither was any particular shame brought to Christendom. "And if 'Egypt' is taken literally, there has been no war between Egypt and Persia since 1555 (or in fact since the 6th century BC), though there may well be one in the future." Leoni concludes that Nostradamus's prophecy is therefore "a well-dated failure" (Leoni 1982, 615).³

(Neither is this quatrain the only one with a dated prediction that has failed. Quatrain X:72 forecast, for the seventh month of the year 1999, the coming "from the sky" of a "great King of Terror" from a place called *Angoulmois* [Nostradamus 1555]. Whether the word is interpreted as the French district *Angoulmois* or

as an anagram for *Mongolois* [Mongols—see Leoni 1982, 434–35, 750], the specified events did not occur.)

7. The Invention and Flight of the Montgolfier Balloon. In quatrain V:57, Nostradamus (1557) wrote:

*Istra du mont Gaulfier & Auentine,
Qui par le trou aduertira l'armée:
Entre deux rocz sera prins le butin,
De Sext. mansol faillir la renommee.*

I offer the following translation:

Going from Mount Gaussier and
Aventine,
Through the hole one notifies the
army;
Two rocks the booty is taken
between,
For Sext. Mausol. to lose celebrity.



Some Nostradamians (e.g., Ionescu 1987) have interpreted the quatrain as predicting the invention of the Montgolfier balloon, the hot-air craft used for the first successful human flight in 1783. Stuart Robb (1961, 143) views it as "one of the most amazing prophecies of the French seer." Supposedly, the quatrain specifically cites Montgaulfier [*sic*]; the word *trou* or "hole" refers to the balloon's opening; and so on. Unfortunately, *Gaulfier* is an obvious printer's error, a common misreading of the Middle-French long *s* (it resembles *f*), coupled with an early version of the name of a hill near Saint-Remy (*Gaulsier*), actually spelled *Gaussier*.

There, at the foot of Mount Gaussier, is a celebrated once-supposed "mausoleum" (actually only a monument) of Sextus. (Hence, Nostradamus's "Sext. mansol" is obviously a reference with another printer's error: an inverted *u* having become an *n*.) Nearby are the *deux rocz* ("two rocks") and *le trou* ("hole") through the mountain that Nostradamus surely refers to (see Leoni 1982, 266, 649; Randi 1993, 184). Therefore, the quatrain does not represent a prophecy of balloon flight but is instead a murky reference to some obscure incident—real or imagined—from the boyhood of Nostradamus, who was born at Saint-Remy (see also Roberts 1949, 164). Basically, the quatrain states how, once in the region, passage through "the hole" was effected to alert an army and a certain *butin* (plunder) taken between two rocks, causing the Sext[us] Mausol[us] to lose its renown.

8–9. The Terrorist Strike on New York City. Some say the following quatrains—VI:97 and X:49 (text from 1557 and 1568 editions, respectively)—predict the attack of September 11, 2001:

*Cinq & quarante degrés ciel bruslera,
Feu approcher de la grand cité
neusue,⁴
Instant grand flamme esparse saultera,
Quât on voudra des normâs faire
preuue.*

*Jardin du monde aupres de cité neufue,
Dans le chemin de montaignes cauees
Sera saisi & plonge dans la Cuue,
Beuuant par force eaux soulfre enuen-
imees.*

Here are my translations of the two quatrains:

At forty-five degrees shall burn the
sky,
Fire to approach the new grand city
thence;
Instantly great scattered flames will
arise,
When one shall seek the Normans'
evidence.

Garden of the world near the new
city,
In the pathway of cavernous moun-
tains,
Seized and plunged into a cauldron
shall be,
Forced to drink water that's sulfur-
poisoned.

Following the September 11 terrorist strike on New York City, a fake prophecy attributed to Nostradamus told of an attack on the “City of York.” The real Nostradamian prophecies refer only to “the new city” and “the new grand city.” One verse’s “hollow mountains” are interpreted as skyscrapers, and there is no doubt—with references to flames and waters poisoned by sulfur—that Nostradamus is forecasting calamity (Hogue 2003, xii–xiv).

However, *before* the terrorist attacks Nostradamians were offering non-terrorist explanations. Roberts (1949, 96) interpreted the first quatrain as saying, “A catclysmic fire shall engulf the greatest and newest of the world’s big cities.” Of the second, he said (1949, 328): “This startling prophecy of a catastrophic event at a pleasure resort not far from the great new city, predicts a tremendous tidal wave of poisoned waters that shall sweep in from the resort and overwhelm the man-made mountain-like skyscrapers of the city.” Neither of these scenarios is compatible with a terrorist attack on New York, whether by nuclear means or not (Hogue 2003, xiii). Indeed, Nostradamus would seem to be speaking of Europe, at least in the first verse with its reference to “the Normans.” (In any case, New York City is not at forty-five degrees latitude but instead well under forty-one.)

10. The ‘2012’ Predictions. Several of Nostradamus’s quatrains supposedly anticipate the year 2012, the last year on the Mayan calendar (Hogue 1997). Twenty-twelves believe that something portentous will occur then—if not the end of the world, perhaps some New Awakening of Consciousness and blah, blah, blah. Quatrain II:62 has been mentioned in this regard (Nostradamus 1555; see Andrews and Andrews 2008, 265):

*Mabus puis tost alors mourra, viendra
De gens & bestes vne horrible defaite:
Puis tout à coup la vengeance on verra
Cent, main, soif, faim, quād courra la
comete.*

Here is how I translate quatrain II:62:

Mabus then afterwards will die;
comes next
A horrible defeat of men and beasts:

All at once vengeance will be seen to
vex.

A comet’s pass—bloody hand,
hunger, thirst.

The word *mabus* is unidentified, but some Nostradamians believe it refers to Saddam Hussein, noting (incorrectly) that *mabus* spells *sadam* when held before a mirror. (In fact it reads *sudam*—with the *s* and *a* backward [see Andrews and Andrews 2008].) A more likely possibility is that the handwritten word was misread by the typesetter’s reader, that it was actually *malus*, meaning “the evil one.” Also, the first word of the last line, *cent* (“one hundred”), is more likely the similar-sounding *sang* (“blood”) (see LeVert 1979, 129).

Nostradamus predicted many calamities—often heralded by a comet, according to a superstition of his time. However, he did not make a doomsday prophecy, merely stating in a later preface that his forecasts “extend from now to the year 3797” (qtd. in Leoni 1982, 127). Nevertheless, Twenty-twelves seem to be “desperately trying to find a way of decoding a 2012 prediction from Nostradamus’ quatrains” (Stray 2009, 268).

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As these examples show, one cannot claim that Nostradamus successfully predicted the future. In his book *The Occult Conceit*, Owen Rachleff (1971, 138) characterized Nostradamus’s prophecies as “exquisite examples of ambiguity, aided by a keen sense of history.” However, James Randi (1993, 223) did see the future regarding Nostradamus, predicting many years ago that his legend would survive:

An ever-abundant number of interpreters will pop up to renew the shabby exterior of his image, and that gloss will serve to entice more unwary fans into acceptance of the false predictions that have enthralled millions in the centuries since his death. Shameless rationalizations will be made, ugly facts will be ignored and common sense will continue to be submerged in enthusiasm.

Amazing! Every word has come true! □

Notes

1. Since 1568, the original text’s *Deux classes vne* has been rewritten as *Deux plaies une* (“Two wounds, one”) so that it would better fit King Henry’s death in 1559. Actually, Nostradamus’s *classes* means “fleets” everywhere else in the quatrains (Leoni 1982, 576).

2. Roberts (1949, 102) attempts to convert the date to 2025 using a “special chronology” he divines from Nostradamus.

3. See Robb (1961, 59–61) for a contrary view.

4. Here is another *slf* mistake: *cit   neusue* should be *cit   neufue* as in the other of the pair of quatrains (X:49)—in modern French, *cit   neufue*.

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