

BIGAMY IN EDWARD IV's FIRST MARRIAGE

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Reading in Mrs. Lamb's book "The Betrayal of Richard III" about Richard's rights to the throne, the following passage struck me: "*The story (of Edward's pre-contract), is in all probability true . . . there is a curious reference to a letter written by his mother at the time of his marriage to Elizabeth Woodville in which the Duchess of York implores her son not to commit the sin of bigamy.*"¹ This remark puzzled me because I did not know there existed such important evidence supporting Richard's claim. However when I looked for the passage in More's "History" I found the following strange story. According to More the Duchess of York wrote to Edward saying: "*. . . the widowhood of Elizabeth Grey alone . . . should yet suffice as meseems to refrain you from her marriage since it is an unfitting thing, and a very high disparagement to the sacred majesty of a prince—that ought as high to approach priesthood in purity as he does in dignity—to be defouled with bigamy in his first marriage.*"²

It is clear More does not use the word bigamy in the ordinary sense since he refers to the widowhood of Elizabeth Grey. However the word bigamy had a second meaning in those days: "*at 14 July 1273 the Council of Lyon forbade bigamy by the clergy, i.e. that a marriage with non-virgins (widows and light women) was declared incompatible with the clergy.*"³ So this is what More means by "bigamy." In fact More is saying that the Duchess of York told her son not to marry Elizabeth Woodville for many reasons, amongst others because she was a widow. In marrying a widow he would not be chaste, such a marriage being forbidden to a "priest." I certainly can agree with Mrs. Lamb when she says it is a "curious reference." Why does the word bigamy (also meaning a double marriage in the fifteenth century) appear in this story? I can hardly believe that the Duchess really said these things. Against this opinion it is indeed true that the position of a prince was considered comparable to that of a priest. Perhaps therefore a king marrying a non-virgin would be thought of as contravening this ruling. Even so it seems in our eyes a very unrealistic and illogical argument to use to Edward IV—a notorious womaniser. However we must not forget that to people of 500 years ago the objection would be a very real one, and I reject More's story for the reasons given below, not because of its strangeness.

Now let us return to More, and suppose that the Duchess did not write exactly the things he mentions. In this case there are two possibilities:—

a) More heard a rumour about bigamy, and used the word in the ecclesiastical sense, as he used it in the "Dialogue concerning Heresies" (see Sylvester, note 3), assuming that the Duchess was referring to Elizabeth Woodville's widowhood.

b) More (if you wish Morton) knew the real story of the pre-contract very well but deliberately used the word bigamy in the special ecclesiastical sense to avoid any suggestion that Richard had rights to the throne. In that case though, why did he tell the story in the first place? It was easier not to mention it at all, except that if the rumour existed it was known not only to More but to a lot of other people as well. In this case More (Morton) used the word bigamy

in the same way that Henry Tudor's historians used the name of Elizabeth Lucy instead of that of Eleanor Butler, i.e. to retell somebody's story with sufficient difference from the original to make it appear very unlikely. I really think we have a parallel here, because one can wonder why Henry VII let his historians mention the pre-contract at all, as one can wonder why More mentioned the word bigamy. With the former we *know* the name was changed.

It seems undeniable that the Duchess of York reacted strongly in some way to the news of Edward's proposed marriage. We can read in Kendall's "Richard III": "*Mancini states categorically that when the Duchess of York learned that her son Edward was married to Elizabeth Woodville she 'fell into such a frenzy that she offered to submit to a public enquiry and asserted that Edward was not the offspring of her husband the Duke of York, but was conceived in adultery and therefore in no wise worthy of the honour of kingship'.*"⁴ I can hardly think that Cicely Neville would make such a scene over the fact that Elizabeth Woodville was not a foreign princess as More states. The Duchess of York was not a woman like Margaret Beaufort and did not meddle in political business, so far as we know. It is far more likely that she was worried about the fact that he committed the sin of bigamy. Furthermore I do not think she would accuse herself of adultery because she was angry with her son. It is again far more likely that she warned Edward that *his* children would be bastards. Of course, the story of Edward's bastardy was told by others, notably Clarence.

Thus, because of the fact that two sources tell about Cicely's objections, it seems very possible that it was generally known she made them, and perhaps that she used the word bigamy. If we combine these two stories, we see that the Duchess of York possibly mentioned two terms, bigamy and illegitimate offspring; and illegitimate offspring can only come from bigamy if we use this word in the usual way. More uses it in the ecclesiastical sense, but it seems possible that he did this to deliberately obscure the fact that the Duchess of York used it in the ordinary sense. I believe it is significant that More uses the word at all, but particularly significant that he uses it in the way he does. It may be that we have here another attempt to confuse the issue, but, as is often the case with matters concerning Richard III, we cannot be too careful with our conclusions.

NOTES

1. V. B. Lamb "The Betrayal of Richard III," 1959, p. 34.
2. R. S. Sylvester (editor) "The Complete Works of St. Thomas More" Vol. II, 1963, p. 62.
3. Translated from J. J. Mak "De Geboorte der Moderne Westerse Beschaving," 1954. The word "clergy" means here of course that part of the clergy which was allowed to marry.
A similar note is to be found in Sylvester's edition of More pp. 241-242.
4. P. M. Kendall "Richard III," 1957, p. 221.