

'A Fifteenth-Century Prophecy'

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THE LITERARY political prophecy in England thrived for more than 500 years, dating from its highly influential appearance (c. 1139) in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (Book VII—the *Vita Merlini*). Besides Merlin, the prophecies relied primarily, although not exclusively, on John of Bridlington, Thomas of Erceldoune and St Thomas a Becket, as the vatic authorities.

The prophetic pieces conventionally began with a brief recapitulation of actual past events (but worded as a future happening)—this done, as in modern editorials, to lend credence to what follows. The predicted occurrences were more propagandistic than clairvoyant, usually bringing to the fore the writer's emotional view of a political crisis, whether at hand or impending. However, such is the elusive quality of many prophecies that their very vagueness led to their popularity, influence and danger to the crown.

Nowhere were prophecies more in vogue than in Wales. As one critic says, 'The Welsh cherished their prophecies, and brought them out on the least occasion to hail some expected redeemer of their race,' leading to uprisings, disorders and rebellions.¹ Cadwallader's dragon ensign became the symbol of any Welsh prince.² The practice of pressing the prophecies into service to suit the occasion, as multiple interpretations allowed, led to their being banned, however.

English kings often looked upon the prophecies as, well, 'prophetic'. The *Vita Merlini*, for example, contains the prophecy that 'priests shall bear arms,' a rallying cry taken up some 400 years later in the protests over the Reformation policies of Henry VIII.³ That the prophecy was taken seriously is evidenced by Henry's prohibition of such pronouncements, a policy maintained by Edward VI and Elizabeth I.

The contents of one problematic literary (after-the-fact) prophecy (except for a reference to Henry VII), have not fully been made known to readers of *The Ricardian*.⁴ Entitled *The Streets of London*, the work is one of the few fifteenth-century poems to deal with the years 1483-1485.⁴

Comprising 134 lines of irregular rhyming patterns (couplets, triplets, cross-rhymed quatrains, unrhymed lines) and of no readily discernible rhythmic pattern and length, the poem is no literary achievement. Its allusions cannot be pinpointed with surety because the author mingles two methods of identification, the Sibylline (initial letters of persons' names):

Line 31 A knyghte name shalbe called C
 The best borne man in the world is he,

and the Galfridian (animal symbols on family crests to represent the specific persons):

Line 45 The Egyll the Gryffon grene & the bore with hym shalbe
 But the gentyll ffacon shall ask a peticyon,⁶

In addition, the anonymous poet apparently felt no compunctions about interlarding the work with the prognostications of others, including a dice prophecy (l.56) and some punditry on foreign affairs (ll.23-26 have France and Flanders allied with Spain and Denmark).⁷

Previously unnoticed, however, is that verses 12-15:

A dragon with a Rede rose that grete is his fame
A bastarde vnder wedelok shall he bee
The crowne to opteyne he will challenge by name
But yf the thirde aryse the bore shall have degree.

are paralleled in a Welsh manuscript dated 1485-1500.⁸ That the lines refer to Henry VII is probable: one of his standards had a red dragon with a field of red and white roses.⁹ The previous line ('The yere of our lorde m cccc lxxx iij') supports the inference. Indeed, line 15 in the Welsh manuscript reads 'but ij yeres and mor the blew bor schall have degree,' and one may interpret the blue boar as the crest of John de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, one of Henry's allies.¹⁰ The further allusion in 'our' poem (l.95) to 'The blew bore and mollette thorow inglonde shall ryde' also suggests de Vere, whose standard included the 'mullet,' a five-pointed star.¹¹

Of further interest to Ricardians are the first six lines of the poem which mention events from the death of Edward IV¹² to the revolt of the Duke of Buckingham (inferred because Wales supported him):

The yere of our lorde m cccc lxxx iij
Betuext the departyng of Aprell and not far from may
The bull shall departe & passe away
The same yere shalbe moche adoo
Walles shall bere armys and to Albion goo
Which shall cause men to sofer moch woo.

Since the bull was represented on the badge of Hastings, it is tempting to suggest that his beheading is being alluded to. However, Hastings was executed in mid June, and the poem speaks of April and May. More likely, the bull may really be an astrological sign: according to the old reckoning the Sun entered Taurus on April 12 and exited on May 11, certainly 'not far from may.' Another interpretation is also possible if one recalls that Henry Tudor was known as the Black Bull of Anglesey, and he and his two ships hastily departed from the rebellion (although this was on November 1, not in the spring). Perhaps the lines are intended as a foreboding of the reign of Richard III, for from April 9 (the death of Edward IV) to May 15

(the grants of power to Buckingham), the kingdom had been in turmoil as Richard, the Protector, had bearded the Woodvilles in their den.

The turbulent events of 1484–85 are probably alluded to in verses 18–22:

ffor betwext iiij & fyve that grete is to vnderstande
moche sorowe shalbe do be see and be londe
A blake cowe shal aryse ageyne of a trew lyne
Ne the blode of Cadwalidus a grete gentilman is he
A banysshed man ys he for beyonde the see.

Henry Tudor, the Black Bull of Anglesey, self-proclaimed descendant of Cadwallader, and exile in France will redeem the land.

The poem proceeds on a cryptic, elliptic, arhythmic and repetitious course. The Church is admonished (ll. 26–30); the best knight 'called C' joined by the eagle, boar, falcon and griffin will take part in a civil war (31–42); the victors shall march on London but the 'gentle falcon' shall petition that the city and 23 aldermen not be destroyed (43–49); 'then P shall ryse and com oute of the T' and there will be three battles and victory will be in doubt for three long years (50–53); a 'marvel'—the buried shall rise to fight again (54–59); two knights will in 'great accord' determine the rightful heir, but strife will again occur (60–64), and, again probably referring to Henry VII of the bar sinister Beaufort line (65–69):

a bastarde shall com and take enterpryse
A rede rose this bastard in wedelok borne
with hym a dredefull dragon a man of grete fame
the gilden bolle his lyvelode to put from [livelihood]
the ix of cadwaladrus blode by name.

The next few lines appear to bring Richard III onto the scene again, alluding to the pronouncement of the illegality of Edward IV's marriage to Elizabeth Woodville and the resultant bastardy of the children (70–71):

he thynkyth to put E to grete shame
and all his hospryng for ever more. [offspring]

Only the reference to the boar (Richard) in the following two lines is clear; who the 'wicked woman' is remains obscure (72–73):

a wycked woman shalbe cause of blame
the which sholde longe lye in the hande of a bore.

The poem continues with Henry Tudor's return from Brittany along with a young knight named 'P' and a child with a chaplet bearing a royal eagle from over the sea, all in the same lineage as Jesus Christ (74–81); the red rose and white dragon shall force the 'doughty bull' to flee to the stone castle he built himself where he shall be betrayed and his flesh torn, and his

children's wealth turned to woe (82-90); the cock of the north will flee and curse his own downfall (91-94); the blue boar and the mullet (Oxford) shall ride through England, making the 'untrue Troy' tremble¹³ and in 13 days set up justice (95-98); the bear that he tied at a stake as the cause of much strife will become a peacemaker (99-102);¹⁴ a man killed in battle will arise and make peace between two envious men¹⁵ who will remove long-standing woe by restoring a rightful heir (103-109):

Theirfore ryse trew R & take thy son K & crowne E eius filius.

Before this would be accomplished, war would break out. The bull and the red rose would first fight 'betwyxt Glocetor and Wales . . . the seconde at the vij downe on a grete playne.' Many will lose their lives, including the bull and the chief lord (110-118). Then someone fierce will slay the Raven, the 'mylfote'¹⁶ and many others in battle at the cross of stone at 'busbery' (119-122). The red rose and the dragon shall establish prisons at 'honnysley heyth' and 'charen crose'; that battle shall extend from 'Seton' to the sea (123-126).¹⁷

Merlin and he (just the pronoun is given) will moan, and he will tell how a lion shall be banished and go to Berwick (127-129).¹⁸ The rose and the 'Raged tree' will follow by woods and fields (130). Finally, a strong knight in a storm shall blow his bugle 'to reve vp his Ratches' (probably 'snatch up his hunting dogs') and run with open mouth and slay him that was never born for the 'blake crow' (not cow, as in other parts of the poem) because of the vengeance that shall fail in the south (131-134).

The poem's theme, so far as one can tell from the number of lines given over to it, is a truism applicable to many ages (39-42):

Then men shall aryse one ageyne another
 And fare as men that were all wood [mad]
 The son shall sle the father the broder the broder
 That the stretes of London shall ron all on blod.

Unfortunately, the appeals to visionary authority, Bede (l.17) and Merlin (l.127) were not necessary to fulfill the prophecy.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Rupert Taylor, *The Political Prophecy in England* (1911), p.104. Surveys of the genre may be found in Taylor, pp.83-89, and *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English: 1050-1500*, Vol. 5 (1975), pp.1516-1518 (By Rossell H. Robbins).
2. The dragon ensign represents Glendower in *Henry IV, Part I*, III, 1, 149; the same may be true, e.g., for *The Cock in the North* and *The Prophecy of Six Kings to follow King John*, two other representatives of the genre.
3. Madeleine H. Dodds, 'Political Prophecies in the Reign of Henry VIII,' *Modern Language Review*, Vol 11 (1916), pp.276-277.

4. Graham Harris, *The Marvellous Dream of King Arthur*, *The Ricardian*, Vol. 3, No. 44 (March, 1974), p.4.
5. V. J. Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century* (1971), prints the text, Appendix B, pp.386-389. See *A Manual*, p. 1520, p.1716.
6. For example, l.91 alludes to *The cok of the north*, and in a discussion of some possible identifications, the notes to the poem of the same name in *Historical Poems of the XIV and XV Centuries*, Ed. Rossell H. Robbins (1959), pp.309-312, mention that the Cock may refer to Hotspur (the rebellion of 1402) or that the events prophesied with a Yorkist slant, may relate to the controversy in 1450 and 1451 about the successor to Henry VI. Dodds (p.281) considers cock (Latin *gallus*) as a pun on Gauls, thereby referring to the Black Prince, the future King of France. Taylor (p.112) regards Henry VIII as the cock, since it was one of his badges. Interpretation, it appears, is as much a function of dating as it is of allusion.
7. Scattergood, p.390. Of importance also in making this identification is the fact that Wales was a stronghold for Henry's adherents.
8. *A Manual*, p.1521, p.1716.
9. John Woodward and George Burnett, *Woodward's: A Treatise on Heraldry: British and Foreign* (1969), p.595.
10. The blue boar in *The Rose of England* is identified with the Earl of Oxford (see Charles L. Kingsford, *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* (1913), p.249). James Gairdner, *History of the Life and Reign of Richard III*, (1898), p.357, quotes *Lady Bessy*:

The Red Rose and the Blue Boar,
They were both a solemn company.

Gairdner, p. 232n., cites a 'curious story' that Richard III slept at the Blue Boar Inn in Leicester on August 20, just before Bosworth.

11. Oddly enough, the *OED* for *mullet*^a cites as its earliest example of the word this thirteenth century description: Le Conte de Oxford, quartele d'or et de goules [*sic*], une mulet d'argent ent le quarter devant. Paul M. Kendall, *Richard III* (1955), p.360 depicts de Vere as 'striding beneath his banner of a star with streams.'
12. *Historical Poems*, pp.111-113 contains *The Death of Edward IV*.
13. Apparently and alliteratively a prophetic commonplace; see *The Cock in the North* l.37 and the note to the line in *Historical Poems*, p.311.
14. Perhaps these verses and l.130 refer to Richard Neville, whose badge was 'the rampant bear chained to the ragged staff' (*Woodward's*, p.585). Cf. the Merlin prophecy in *A Manual*, p.1522 (g) which includes 'The rose and the ragged staf in frithes and by feldes.' Besides the bear, Neville was 'Galfridianised' often as the bull, a figure which appears several times in this prophecy.
15. Cf. *The Cock in the North* ll.55-58.
16. The word does not appear in the *OED*. It may be a compound of 'mill' and 'foot' or perhaps the latter is a variant of 'ford,' giving Milford (?).
17. Cf. *The Cock in the North* l.28 and the note to the line in *Historical Poems*, p.311.
18. Cf. the Merlin prophecy in *A Manual*, p.1521 (e). Berwick was proverbial for a far-off place; see the reference to the Pardoner in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (A), 692 and Dunbar's *How Dunbar Wes Desryd to be Ane Freir*, l.34.