

The Prophecy of G

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Edward the Fourth consulted prophecies when in doubt, and partly on the strength of a doubtful threat contained in one sent a brother to execution.

Thus the frequently-quoted modern authority on political prophecy, Rupert Taylor, in 1911.¹ The prophecy referred to is the so-called 'prophecy of G'. It first occurred in John Rous' *Historia Regum Angliae*, written between 1489 and 1491:

And because there was a prophecy that after E, that is Edward IV, G would reign, on the strength of these obscure words George, Duke of Clarence, the middle brother between King Edward and King Richard, because of this Duke George was killed. And the other G, that is Gloucester, lived on until he had fulfilled the prophecy.²

Rous' text was probably used by Polydore Vergil³ and Thomas More. Vergil expressed doubts about the prophecy as the cause of Clarence's downfall, but he repeated it:

A report was eaven then spred emongest the common people, that the King was afeard, by reason of a soothsayers prophecy, and so became incensyd agaynst his broother George, which prophecy was, that after King Edward, shold raigne soome one the first letter of whose name should be G. And because the devels ar wont in that sort to envegle the mynds of them who conceave pleasures in such illusions, with ther crafty conceytes and subtylties, menn sayd afterwarde that the same prophecy tooke effect, whan after Edward the duke of Gloucester usurpyd the kingdom.⁴

In the 'better' editions of Thomas More's *The History of King Richard III* the prophecy is not mentioned, but it does appear in the Hardyng-Hall-Grafton editions of 1543-50, and it is possible that it formed part of More's original draft — More himself could have got the story from Rous or Vergil, or common report.⁵ This version of *The History* gives the prophecy a dramatic context and places it firmly before the accession of Henry VII. The drama is certainly More's invention. The scene is Pontefract, the date presumably the historical one of 25 June 1483, and the action the execution of Anthony Woodville, Richard Grey, Thomas Vaughan and 'William Haute', arrested by Richard of Gloucester two months earlier:

... sir Thomas Vaughan goyng to his death sayd, A wo worthe them that toke the prophecie that G. should destroy kyng Edwardes children, meaning that by the duke of Clarence lorde George, which for that suspicion is now dead, but now remayneth Richard G. duke of Gloucester, whiche now I see is he that shal and wyll accomplishe the prophēcie and destroy kyng Edwardes chyldren and all their alyes and frendes, as it appeareth by us this day, ...

This prophecy like all others, as Sir Francis Bacon judiciously remarked,⁶ was 'by idle and crafty brains merely contrived and feigned, after the past event' and must be dated, at the earliest, after Richard of Gloucester's progress towards the throne had become evident. It was only then that some wit could realise the ominous possibilities of the innocent coincidence of Gs. It is more likely that it was composed after the accession of Henry VII, and later cleverly ascribed, by More or others, to Vaughan as a bitter lament on his fate and the political developments that preceded his death.⁷

Educated men, like Vergil, might ascribe prophecies to the common people and suggest that they themselves were above such naive credulity, but the repetition of the prophecy of G and the large number of surviving texts of other similar prophecies is ample evidence that the educated were as credulous as the common people and quite as guilty of circulating such tales.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. R. Taylor, *The Political Prophecy in England*, New York 1911, p. 85; his source for Edward's tendency to consult prophecies was the French royal servant and memorialist of the reign of Francis I, Martin du Bellay (died 1559) in *Mémoires de Martin et Guillaume du Bellay*, ed. V.-L. Bourrilly and F. Vindry, 4 vols., Société d'Histoire de France, Paris 1908-19, vol. 1, pp. 42-3 (see below note 7). Taylor's source for the prophecy concerning Clarence was Shakespeare's *Richard III*!
2. The first sentence is badly constructed, but the present translation follows the passage in the ms., BL. Ms. Cotton Vespasian A xii, illustrated by Alison Hanham, *Richard III and his early historians 1483-1535*, Oxford 1975, opp. p. 121; and printed in H. A. Kelly, *Divine Providence in the England of Shakespeare's Histories*, Cambridge, Mass., 1970, p. 70, n. 23, from the edition of the *Historia Regum Angliae* by Thomas Hearne, Oxford 1716. See also H. A. Kelly, *English Kings and the Fear of Sorcery*, *Medieval Studies*, vol. 39 (1977), p. 230, nn. 97-8. The text would be clearer if it did not read *ob hoc* (because of this, *ob hoc*), but *ob hoc nomen* (because of this name, *ob hoc*), which Hanham translated, although it is not in the ms.
3. Kelly (see n. 2), *Divine Providence*, pp. 90, 98, and *English Kings*, p. 230, n. 98. Hanham (see n. 2), p. 137.
4. Polydore Vergil, *Three Books of Polydore Vergil's English History* . . . , ed. H. Ellis, Camden First Series, vol. 29 (1844), p. 167.
5. *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 2, *The History of King Richard III*, ed. R. S. Sylvester, New Haven and London 1963, pp. xxiv and 58n., and the introduction, *passim*, on the editions of *The History*.
6. In his Essay 'Of Prophecies'.
7. The story occurs in Rous' 'blackest' description of Richard III. Some version of it was used by Edward Hall in 1548 (*Chronicles*, ed. H. Ellis, London 1908, p. 326); George Ferrers in 1559 ('How George Plantagenet . . .', one of the verse tragedies in William Baldwin's *Mirror for Magistrates*, ed. L. B. Campbell, Cambridge 1938, p. 227); Shakespeare in 1593 (*Richard III*, act 1, scene 1); Thomas Heywood in c. 1594 (*King Edward IV, Part II*, London 1842, pp. 138-9). Martin du Bellay (see n. 1) wrote in the 1550s; his version actually says that Edward IV consulted the prophecies of Merlin 'a superstition existing since the days of king Arthur' and that they predicted that the King's brother whose name began with G would take the crown away from his children.