

Research Notes and Queries

Was Bosworth worth a mass?

John Wood writes:—

In his usual opaque and involved Latin the author of the second Crowland Continuation attempted to paint a persuasive picture of King Richard's camp at dawn on the morning of Monday, 22 August 1485. His main dramatic means were the King's nightmare and his reaction to it, and the failure of his servants to provide breakfast on time and of his chaplains to be ready to sing mass. (*The Crowland Chronicle Continuation 1459-1486*, ed. N. Pronay, J. Cox, London 1986, pp.180-1). I hesitate to accept any of these descriptive and suggestive touches as fact.

In 1553-5 Henry Parker, Lord Morley, presented his *Account of Miracles performed by the Holy Eucharist* to Queen Mary. Morley's examples include two stories that go together. The one of the pious, virtuous Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII, who actually expired while mass was being said at the very moment of the elevation of the host, a scene Morley himself had been present at, the other of the impious infanticide Richard III who, according to his own former servant, was not allowed to see the body of Christ on the last day of his life and died without its comfort. (*Forty-six Lives translated from Boccaccio's De Claris Mulieribus* by Henry Parker, Lord Morley, ed. H. G. Wright, EETS OS 214, 1943 (for 1940), repr. 1970, introduction, esp. p.xlii; Retha M. Warnicke, Sir Ralph Bigod: A Loyal Servant to King Richard III, *The Ricardian*, vol. 6 (1984), pp.299-303). Are we to believe unconditionally the details of either of these two eye-witness reports?

In 1955 Paul Murray Kendall wrote his description of Richard's actions and state of mind on the fatal morning: his dreams, his pale looks, the fact that no chaplains could be found anywhere in the camp, and then, as a climax, the King's bold statement that if 'their quarrel were God's, they needed no last supplications; if it were not, such prayers were idle blasphemy'. (P. M. Kendall, *Richard III*, London 1972, pp.358, 492, n.3). Do we automatically give credit to this if it comes from a scholar of our own time?

The Crowland Continuator was cleverly hostile to Richard. He was steeped in the standard classical literature and a master of innuendo. Also, to him, as to all classical, medieval and renaissance writers of biography it was *virtually impossible* to describe a battle and a hero's (or a villain's) death without having it preceded by some kind of omen: troubled dreams, terrifying apparitions, or inauspicious behaviour in men or animals, such as eagles pecking at standards,

sacrificial animals escaping from the knife or servants in a religious ceremony dropping the sacred objects. It is difficult to find a 'life' of a famous historical figure in which such prophetic happenings do not occur. We do not know the Continuator's source for this section, but his picture is worthy of Livy and Plutarch. It should be realised, however, that he does not actually say that no mass was served at all.

Lord Morley's informant was Richard's servant Sir Ralph Bigod, who fought at Bosworth, served Henry VII and Margaret Beaufort, and died in 1515. Bigod's story, as repeated by Morley, reported that when the King's chaplains 'had one thing ready evermore they wanted another, when they had wine they lacked bread, and ever one thing was missing'. It does not ring true; it is a rather feeble attempt to describe a hectic scene effectively. It is not worthy of Morley's vast classical learning.

I do not know whether it was usual to say mass before battle. One would expect it was, but so far other evidence has eluded me. There is, however, no denying the importance of the eucharist, the ecstasy of the medieval Christian at the sight of the elevated host. It is unlikely that the royal chaplains were unprepared for their duties at such a crucial moment, but if mass had been planned and was for some reason denied to Richard and his men, this undoubtedly would have been an awe-inspiring and ominous mishap. Henry V, before Agincourt, had offered praises and heard masses. His biographer, a royal chaplain, was both a cleric (like the Crowland Continuator), and a man with a religious purpose (like Morley) and one would expect him to insert such details. (*Gesta Henrici Quinti*, ed. F. Taylor, J. S. Roskell, Oxford 1975, introduction and pp.82-3). Other, secular, authors either ignore such things or record that the combatants commended their cause to God, blew the trumpets and advanced; failure to mention the fact does not mean that no mass was said.

Kendall's singular statement that Richard had all chaplains removed from the camp and that the King later admitted to this almost cynically, is anachronistic and entirely his own invention. Certainly his given source, the Crowland Continuation, does not warrant it.

The evidence is not convincing. The story could be purely literary embroidery, based on some confusion in the royal camp in the early hours at a time when the slightest hitch could have made people nervous, and elaborated on by authors with too much classical education. In the work of the Crowland Continuator literary convention positively *demand*ed some inauspicious occurrences on Richard's side. Diseased livers found in sacrificial victims and eagle standards that refused to budge were no longer acceptable, so the inefficiency of those officiating in the religious ceremony had to serve — apart from the inevitable haunted rest and pale 'morning face' of the villain. As for Bigod's fifty year-old story: it may so easily have got transformed by time and exaggerated by him and Morley for their own purposes. The third 'witness', Kendall, undoubtedly did mistranslate and write his own kind of fiction.

Personally I am sure neither Henry nor Richard spent the night and the early hours of 22 August 1485 as if challenged to a game of chess, but, as William Hutton, historian of Bosworth wrote (W. Hutton, J. Nichols, *The Battle of Bosworth Field* . . . , second edn., London 1831):

What midnight horrors rent the soul of Richard, or what angelic visions appeared to comfort Henry, I leave to the poetic talents of a Lancastrian, and shall observe, that neither of them could court repose on the eve of so momentous a day.

The Boar Emblem of Tristan

Ms Marie Barnfield writes:—

Further to the article Richard III's Books: X. The *Prose Tristan*, by Anne F. Sutton and Livia Visser-Fuchs, in *The Ricardian*, volume 9, number 112, March 1991, I should like to suggest an alternative source for the boar emblem associated with Tristan. The authors mention (p.24) as sources for the legend "Irish stories spliced by Welsh story-tellers to the Pictish saga". In fact, there is one particular Irish story believed by Celtic scholars to be the source of the Tristan tale, and that is *Diarmuid and Gráinne*. Diarmuid, the hero of this Irish elopement tale, is associated very closely with the figure of a black boar. The tale goes that he had a foster-brother whom his father slew in jealousy; the child's own father then transformed his dead son into a black boar, laying on this beast and on Diarmuid the doom that they should each have the same lifespan, and that when this was ended they would slay each other. Diarmuid died as foretold, as the result of a hunt in which he slew this very boar, having himself first been mortally wounded by it. The boar may therefore be seen as Diarmuid/Tristan's own shadow-self or fate.

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