

'Richard Liveth Yet': an Old Myth

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THIS PHRASE 'RICHARD LIVETH YET' is probably the most frequently cited of the poem listing the twelve children of Richard, Duke of York, and Cecily Neville. It is a phrase of apparent significance. Readers have often concluded that he was a sickly child, barely alive at the time the lines were written.¹ No doubt they have been influenced by a prior knowledge of John Rous' account of Richard's monstrous birth and deformity.² However much the modern researcher is aware of the late date and dubious authenticity of Rous' story, the image remains at the back of the mind and, however ludicrous, it informs the other source, however innocent. And innocent, indeed, of all such association or interpretation the poem turns out to be when the original is read.

The poem was partially quoted by Gairdner and his source mysteriously given as 'Vincent on Brooke'. Recent historians, apparently deterred by this reference, have been content to cite Gairdner. 'Vincent' was in fact Augustine Vincent (died 1626), Windsor Herald from 1624 and clerk in the Tower Record Office, an expert on medieval genealogy who knew and used many primary sources.³ 'Brooke' was Ralph Brooke (died 1626), York Herald, another genealogist, who in 1619 attacked the accuracy of William Camden's *Britannia*. Brooke's acrimonious *A Catalogue and Succession of the Kings, Princes, Dukes, Marquesses, Earles, and Viscounts of this Realme of England, since the Norman Conquest to the present yeare . . .*, was in its turn scathingly criticised in Vincent's *A Discoverie of Errours in the first edition of the Catalogue of the Nobility, Published by Raphe Brooke, . . .*, 1622. Aside from the larger quarrel between the two men, Vincent was able to correct Brooke in two instances⁴ by using the 'rythmicall lines' from an 'ancient rolle' that was then in his 'owne custody'.⁵

Vincent's roll is now usually called the Clare Roll.⁶ Its text is 'A Dialogue between a Secular and a Friar',⁷ and dates itself to 'the first day of May the yere a ml cccc lvjti' (1456). It is a vellum roll, ten inches wide, two feet eight inches long; it has a three-line heading across the width of the page and a text in two columns, English on the left and Latin on the right. The English version has eighteen stanzas rime royal, the Latin exactly a hundred rhyming hexameters (leonines). Below the heading, in the middle of the page and half taking up the space left by the shorter column in Latin is a picture of two men talking across a tomb; the man

on the left wears a dark gown and must be the friar of the title, the other is more frivolously dressed in pink and is no doubt the secular. Down the centre of the roll, between the two columns of text, are eleven coats of arms of lords and ladies of Clare, painted in full colour. The first is that of Richard, Earl of Gloucester (died 1262), the last is presumably the future Edward IV's (Mortimer impaling [blank]).⁸

In the course of the conversation, carried on by questions from the secular, who is probably a visitor to the priory, and answers from the friar, the story of the foundation of the house and its benefactors, the lords of Clare, is told. In the tomb is buried Joan of Acre, Edward I's daughter, who married Gilbert of Clare in 1290. Their descendants are named one by one; the last lord of Clare is

Richard which yet liveth, is
Duke of Yorke by discent of his fadir
And has Marchis londis by right of his modir⁹

It should be noted that the Duke of York, like his son, 'liveth yet', which merely means that he is alive, in contrast to his ancestors, who are not, it is no comment on the state of his health.

The speaker lingers for a moment on the Duke's happy marriage, then his children are discussed.

Sir, aftir the tyme of longe bareynesse,
God first sent Anne, which signifyeth grace,
In token that at her hertis hevynesse
He as for bareynesse wold fro hem chace.
Harry, Edward, and Edmonde, eche in his place
Succedid; and after tweyn doughters cam
Elizabeth and Margarete, and aftir William.

John aftir William nexte borne was,
Whiche bothe be passid to Goddis grace:
George was next, and after Thomas
Borne was, which sone aftir did pace
By the pathe of dethe into the heavenly place.
Richard liveth yet; but the last of alle
Was Ursula, to him whom God list calle.

Richard, like his father, is alive, in contrast to four of his brothers who have gone to a happier fate. The parallel Latin text of the relevant passage reads:

Margret post proles hinc Willelmusque Johannes,
Quos raptos seculo statuit Deus almus Olimpo.
Inde Georgius est natus Thomasque Ricardus,
Thomas in fata secessit sorte beata.
Ultima jam matris proles fuit Ursula, regis
Que summi voto celesti jungitur agno.

Translated literally this means: After Margaret next came William and John, whom God took away from the world and placed on Olympus. Then George is born, and Thomas [and] Richard. Thomas departed this life by a happy fate. The last daughter of the mother was Ursula, who by the wish of the highest King is wedded to the heavenly Lamb.

The Latin text makes it absolutely certain, if there should be any doubt, that no comment is being made about young Richard's health.

The friar next recounts the present status of the children, in answer to a remark (only found in the Latin text) from the visitor: 'You have described very well how they are. Please tell me their future fortune, if you know it'.¹⁰

To the duke of Excestre Anne married is
In her tendir youth: But my lord Henry
God chosen hath to enherite heven blis,
And lefte Edward to succede temporally,
Now Erle of Marche; and Edmonde of Rutland sothly
Counte bothe fortunabil. To right high mariage
The othir foure stonde yit in their pupilage.

A literal translation of the Latin text reads: The Duke of Exeter has Anne to wife. Edward is Earl of March, his father's heir; Edmund is called earl of Rutland. To the three other children the parents in their great love will in due time give worthy titles.¹¹

There was nothing unique about the friar's knowledge of the number and fate of York's children. Contemporary genealogical rolls were equally well informed, listing and numbering the children and given them their title if they survived to have one.¹² They also occurred in chronicles such as the pseudo-William Worcester's.¹³ The Clare friar's specialised knowledge concerned the earlier patrons of the priory, whose data were no doubt preserved in some form in the house's care. The author went to great trouble to put these facts into a literary form, choosing the dialogue to make it more accessible. When he had finished his Latin hexameters he still had to make an English version. It was contemporary usage and the demands of metre that forced him to describe Richard and his father as living 'yet'.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. James Gairdner appears to be the first cause of the confusion, see his *History of the Life and Reign of Richard III*, Cambridge 1898, pp.4-6. He was used by P. M. Kendall, *Richard III*, London 1955, p.28, and P. W. Hammond and Anne F. Sutton, *Richard III. The Road to Bosworth Field*, London 1985, p.23, and by other historians (e.g. A. Cheetham, *Richard III*, London 1972, p.12) who do not give their source, as well as various novelists. Desmond Seward, *Richard III, England's Black Legend*, London 1983, p.28, has the myth in all its glory. C. A. Halsted, *Richard III*, 2 vols., London 1844, vol. 1, pp.31-2 and Appendix G, discusses the text and includes the relevant section of the poem in full from Weever, *Ancient Funeral Monuments* (see n.5, below), but draws no conclusions concerning Richard's health. A commonsense approach based on Gairdner's quote is found in A. J. Pollard, *Richard III and the Princes in the Tower*, Stroud 1991, p.29. Another frequently-used source for the children of York is 'William Wyrcester's Annales' in J. Stevenson, ed., *Letters and Papers Illustrative of the Wars of the English in France*, 2 vols., RS 1864, vol. 2, pt.2, pp.762-71, where Thomas is omitted.
2. In his *Historia . . . de regibus Anglie*, see e.g. Alison Hanham, *Richard III and His Early Historians*, Oxford 1975, p.120.
3. On Vincent and the Brooke 'affair' see A. Wagner, *Heralds of England. A History of the Office and College of Arms*, London 1967, pp.227-9.
4. Vincent, *A Discoverie*, p.125 (on Lionel of Clarence), pp.621-3 (on the children of York).
5. This is confirmed by John Weever in his *Ancient Funeral Monuments*, London 1631, who copied 'certain rythmicall lines . . . out of an ancient Roll, as then in the custody of my deare deceased friend, Aug. Vincent'. He includes a description of the roll and its full Latin and English text (pp.734-42). It was printed again by William Dugdale, Garter king of arms, *Monasticum Anglicanum*, 1835 edn., vol. 8, pp.1599-1600, s.v. Stoke Clare.

6. Now preserved at the College of Arms, London. We are grateful to the College of Arms for allowing us to consult the ms., and in particular to Mr. Robert Yorke, Archivist, for his assistance.
7. See *A Manual of Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500*, gen eds. J. Burke Severs and A. E. Hartung, 8 vols., New Haven, Conn., 1962-89, vol. 3 (1972), VII [38], and references given there; a short discussion of the roll and the full English text are given in K. W. Barnardiston, *Clare Priory. Seven Centuries of a Suffolk House*, Cambridge 1962, ch.8.
8. The upper part of the roll is illustrated in College of Arms, catalogue of *The Herald's Commemorative Exhibition, 1484-1934*, London 1938, item 16, pl.42. For preliminary comments on the roll's illumination see K. L. Scott, Lydgate's lives of Saints Edmund and Fremund: a newly-located manuscript in Arundel castle, *Viator*, vol. 13 (1982), pp.335-66, esp. nn.68, 96.
9. The Latin text (which because of its number of lines and greater detail probably was composed first) is much more elaborate:

... Ut nardus redolens quinimmo Ricardus
 Hinc nascebatur, patris qui jure vocatur
 Dux Eboracensis cujus praefulgeret ensis
 Bellorum titulis gloriosus atque triumphis.
 Cuique natura donavit munera plura
 Et fortuna suis hunc pinxit dotibus amplis;
 Gratia succurat, quod longo tempore vivat
 Felici vita virtutibus et redimita.

(The renowned and famous Richard . . . , who is called the Duke of York by right of his father. His sword shines forth, he is glorious in his titles and his war triumphs. Nature gave him many talents, and fortune adorned him with large gifts. May he also have the blessing of a long life, happy virtuous and crowned with glory).

10. Optime naturam pinxisti; pande futuram,
 Si scis, fortunam.
11. ... Dux Excestir tenet Annam
 Uxorem, quae [sic] comes March est Edward patris heres.
 Rutlande Edmundus comes existit vocitatus.
 Tres reliquias proles solita pietate parentes
 Tempore condigno titulabunt nomine digno.
12. For example Oxford, Bodleian Library Ms. Lyell 33. A late but attractive example is found in BL Ms. Kings 395, illustrated in Cheetham (see n.1), p.2.
13. See n.1.