

Research Notes and Queries

Queen Elizabeth Woodville and the Angelus

John Ashdown-Hill writes:-

The article, 'A Most Benevolent Queen', by Anne F. Sutton and Livia Visser-Fuchs, in the June 1995 issue of the *Ricardian*, throws an interesting sidelight on the development of one particular aspect of Catholic religious practice in England. It refers to 'the pope [having] allowed special indulgences to those who would kneel and devoutly say the Angelical salutation ... three times a day'. Catholics will readily recognise in this the Marian devotion known, from the opening word of its first responsory, as the 'Angelus'.

The Angelus consists of three short responsories, each followed by the recitation of the 'Hail Mary'. There is then a final invocation and closing prayer. The devotion is 'a prayer in honour of the Incarnation in the form of the angel's announcement to our Lady of her tremendous destiny to be the Mother of God. It is said at morning, noon and night, standing on Saturday evening and Sunday, kneeling at other times.' Public recitation of the Angelus was and is accompanied by the ringing of the Angelus bell. The bell is rung with three rapid strokes to mark each of the three responsories and *Aves*, and then nine strokes during the final invocation and prayer, the original object of this being that the faithful could hear the bell from a distance and join in the devotion wherever they happened to be, in the fields or in the street, without actually having to go to the church.

'The use of a similar devotion, recited at night to a bell, was adopted in Germany in the thirteenth century. The morning Angelus first appears in the fourteenth century, while the earliest evidence for the mid-day Angelus is from the fifteenth century.'²

Pope John XXII (1316-1334) recommended to the faithful the recitation of the evening Angelus (the format of which had been prescribed under Innocent IV in 1246, by canon seven of the Council of Béziers,) and he sought to promote the devotion by the granting of indulgences in 1318 and 1327.³ The indulgence

granted by pope Sixtus IV, at Elizabeth Woodville's request, on 2 January 1481 indicates that by that date at least the Angelus was established in the thrice daily format which it still has today.

It has been argued that this devotion was not general in the Catholic Church until after the Reformation,⁴ but the evidence of its use in England disproves this. In fact Elizabeth Woodville must have been very successful in her attempt to popularise it, for when the break with Rome came, Henry VIII's Injunctions of 1538 specifically forbade the ringing of the Angelus.⁵

1. J.D. Crichton, ed., *Layman's Missal*, London 1961, p. 1240. The Angelus is not said during the Easter season, being replaced by the antiphon 'Regina Caeli'.
2. F.L. Cross, ed., *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Oxford 1958, p. 54.
3. W.E. Addis, revised by P.E. Hallett, *A Catholic Dictionary*, London 1955, p. 25.
4. e.g. by J. Tiller in J.D. Douglas, ed., *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Exeter 1974, p. 42.
5. E. Duffy *The Stripping of the Altars*, New Haven and London 1992, p. 408.

Queen Elizabeth Woodville's Reputation

Miss Isolde Wigram writes:-

It is always stimulating to read a reassessment of a familiar historical figure and Ricardians should be sympathetic to any victim of calumny. Anne Sutton and Livia Visser-Fuchs have shown in their article 'A Most Benevolent Queen': Queen Elizabeth Woodville's Reputation, her Piety and her Books (*Ricardian* Volume IX, number 129, June 1995, pp. 214-45) much hitherto unrecognised virtue in Elizabeth and the tendency of historians to copy from each other rather than to check from the original sources. However some points are arguable.

On the matter of the condemnation of the seventh Earl of Desmond in 1468 by John Tiptoft Earl of Worcester, the Deputy Lieutenant of Ireland, the circumstances remain mysterious though the cause may have been an accusation of treason.¹ However it was held at the time in Ireland that he was 'beheaded without proper cause' and the King was said to have been displeased. Richard III's instructions in September 1484 to his emissary to Desmond's son are in strong words: '... the Fadre of the said Erle ... was extorciously slayne & muredred by colour of the lawes within Irland by certain persones than havng the governaunce and Rule there ayenst all manhode Reason & good conscience...',² urging the Earl to obtain what redress he could within Ireland. His reference to the 'semblable chaunce' (similar case) of his brother the Duke of Clarence surely shows that he still felt strongly, six years later, about Clarence's death which he infers was on a trumped-up charge. Unless his words about those responsible were, in Clarence's

case, directed against his brother Edward IV (which is unlikely since it is on record that Edward regretted Clarence's condemnation) he can only mean the Woodvilles, who Mancini states were believed 'by all of causing the death of the duke of Clarence'.³ Certainly Elizabeth was not mentioned, any more than her family, and it is unlikely that Richard would have accused her since he had only that year come to an accommodation with her, but there can be little doubt that he also held the Woodvilles and Greys responsible for his brother's death. The further reference to 'his nighe kinsmen and gret frendes' is perhaps a little hyperbole as he had not lost a 'nighe kinsman' by execution, other than Clarence, since the deaths of his father, brother and uncle at Wakefield when he was only eight years old.

Sutton and Visser-Fuchs (p. 220) note that 'Neither did any other contemporary or near-contemporary suggest that Elizabeth or her family destroyed Clarence', yet Richard's words above bear out Mancini's statement that at the time Richard was 'overheard to say that he would one day avenge his brother's death'.⁴ A.J. Pollard comments on Mancini's 'inconsistent approach to the Woodvilles' which was no doubt the result of his trying to balance what he was able to gather from common gossip with information from the presumably pro-Woodville Dr Argentine. Mancini made clear the difference between the public estimation of Lord Rivers, with whom Dr Argentine was familiar, and the other three leading members of Elizabeth's family: her two sons by her first husband and her brother Sir Edward Woodville. It is perhaps worth quoting this passage:

The other three earned the hatred of the populace, on account of their morals, but mostly, because of a certain inherent jealousy which arises between those who are equal by birth when there has been a change in their station. They were certainly detested by the nobles, because they, who were ignoble and newly made men, were advanced beyond those who far excelled them in breeding and wisdom. They had to endure the imputation brought against them by all, of causing the death of the duke of Clarence.⁵

Mancini gives details of the debate in the council on the role to be assigned to Richard of Gloucester as the king's uncle and Protector-designate, and continues that the proposal to limit his power by a regency council won the day, and 'All who favoured the queen's family voted for this proposal, as they were afraid that, if Richard took unto himself the crown or even governed alone, they, who bore the blame of Clarence's death, would suffer death or at least be ejected from their high estate'.⁷ An attempt on Richard's life, confirmed by Richard's letter to York⁸ would be an easy option. However, Richard's successful counter-attack in arresting Rivers and Grey at Northampton led, again according to Mancini, to

The queen and the marquess, who held the royal treasure...collecting an army, to defend themselves, and to set free the young king from the clutches of the dukes. But when they had exhorted certain nobles who

had come to the city, and others, to take up arms, they perceived that men's minds were not only irresolute, but altogether hostile to themselves. Some even said openly that it was more just and profitable that the youthful sovereign should be with his paternal uncle than with his maternal uncle and uterine brothers'.⁹

Sutton and Visser-Fuchs make no reference to Richard's allegations against the Queen and her family of attempts on his life, but Elizabeth's precipitous move into the sanctuary at Westminster (with preparations for a long stay to judge by Thomas More's description of the breaking down of the wall between the palace and the sanctuary to accommodate the larger movables) could argue a guilty conscience as well as fear of reprisals.

They also state that 'Evidence for any enmity between Edward's friend and favourite, William, Lord Hastings, and the Woodvilles, especially the Queen, is very slender', and then proceed to cite the Crowland Chronicle, Mancini and More, the latter giving a perfectly plausible factual reason, the transference of Rivers' captivity of Calais to Hastings.¹⁰ This hardly seems 'slender' evidence.

The reference to 'Elizabeth's last years spent outside Henry VII's court and her residence in Bermondsey Abbey' is a masterpiece of under-statement. Henry's despatch of his mother-in-law to the nunnery at Bermondsey, stripped of all her revenues, may not have been altogether unwelcome to her in view of her piety and good works revealed by Sutton and Visser-Fuchs, but to make it sound as if it were her own choice of residence is really misleading. And to refer to her executor, Thomas Grey, Marquess of Dorset, as 'her sole surviving son' rather than the sole accessible one, is equally so in view of the widespread rumours of the survival of her youngest son the Duke of York. Indeed it was probably due to her expectation of his arrival from overseas that she found herself in Bermondsey Abbey and Dorset would find himself temporarily in the Tower.

Elizabeth is to be pitied for her violent changes in fortune, and one is inclined to agree with our authors' assessment that 'her successive actions ... were clearly forced upon her by circumstances' (p. 221), but that there was anti-Woodville feeling which must have included the Queen is evident, and it did not need what Pollard calls Richard's propaganda to stir it up. Mancini was probably near the mark when he referred to the 'inherent jealousy which arises between those who are equal in birth when there has been a change in their station'. Elizabeth was the first commoner queen and she had to contend with considerable prejudice, nor did her family, except Rivers, help her to overcome it. It is to her credit that she succeeded as well as she did.

1. A.J. Otway-Ruthven, *A History of Medieval Ireland*, London 1968, p. 392.

2. R. Horrox and P. Hammond, eds., *British Library Harleian Manuscript 433*, 4 vols London and Uppminster 1978-83, vol. 3, p. 108.

3. Dominic Mancini, *The Usurpation of Richard III*, ed., C.A.J. Armstrong, 2nd ed., Oxford 1969, p. 69.
4. Mancini, p. 63.
5. A.J. Pollard, Dominic Mancini's Narrative of the Events of 1483, *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, vol. 38 (1994), p. 159.
6. Mancini, p. 69.
7. Mancini, p. 71.
8. R. Davies, ed., *York Records*, London 1843, pp. 148-150.
9. Mancini, p. 79.
10. *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. 11, 51.

Book Reviews

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This volume has thirty-three contributions; these reflect the wide range of K.V. Sinclair's interests as defined by the 125 items in the prefatory bibliography of his writings. Contributions are grouped under headings such as Codicology, 'Scribal', Manuscript Illustrations and Illustrators, Literary History and Individual Authors, Translations, and Philology. Particularly suitable as offerings for the author of a major catalogue of medieval manuscripts (*Descriptive Catalogue of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in Australia*, 1969), and for someone who has done so much for the study of medieval devotional texts in French, are J.P. Gumbert's handlist of manuscripts containing medieval French in Leiden University Library, Judith Oliver's discussion of French devotional texts in Beguine Psalters, and Clive Sneddon's account of a Middle French translation of the Pauline Epistles.