

Research Notes and Queries

The 'Retirement' of Elizabeth Woodville, and her Sons

Isolde Wigram writes:—

Anne Sutton's and Livia Visser-Fuchs' note 65 to their article 'The Royal Burials of the House of York at Windsor', (*Ricardian* vol. 11, no. 144, p. 460), states that 'The implication that she [Elizabeth Woodville] was sent there [Bermondsey Abbey] by Henry VII because he suspected her of supporting Lambert Simnel has little foundation'. This may be so if 'Lambert Simnel' were the pretender from Ireland, but if Elizabeth believed him to be one of her sons, and if Henry also believed in this possibility, his action in silencing her in a nunnery and in leaving her no means to help the pretender financially, might well have been a precautionary measure. It is often overlooked that Henry also consigned the princes' half-brother the marquess of Dorset to the Tower for the duration of the Simnel rising, a point made in Gordon Smith's 'Lambert Simnel and the King from Dublin' (*Ricardian* vol. 10, no. 135, pp. 508-9), where he also discussed 'evidence that Elizabeth Woodville accepted that Richard III was not responsible for the death of her sons Edward V and York, or indeed that she believed that the boys were still alive. Their survival in secret could explain the disappearance of the sons of Edward IV during the reign of Richard III' ('Lambert Simnel and the King from Dublin' p. 502).

From Livia Visser-Fuchs' translation of Niclas von Popplau's diary dealing with 'what [he] really wrote about Richard III' (*Ricardian* vol. 11, no. 145, pp. 525-30), the concluding sentence runs 'And King Richard, who reigns at the moment, has, they say, also killed King Edward his brother's sons, so that not they, but he was crowned. However, many people say — and I agree with them — that they are still alive and are kept in a very dark cellar', and in reference to this Visser-Fuchs writes (n. 10) 'I hope that what von Popplau really meant was that they were imprisoned somewhere very secretly where nobody could find them'.

This might agree with the tradition in the Tyrell family 'that the princes and their mother Elizabeth Woodville lived in the hall by permission of the uncle' (Audrey Williamson, *The Mystery of the Princes: An Investigation into a Supposed Murder*, Gloucester 1978, p. 122), the reference being to the Tyrell seat Gipping Hall near Stowmarket, Suffolk. If the princes were sent to live secretly with their mother in the care of Richard's confidential agent Sir James Tyrell, they may have had rather close quarters, at least when strangers were about, perhaps equivalent to a priest's hole. Thus no one would have known better than Elizabeth that her sons survived Richard's reign to press their claims successively against Henry VII.

Gordon Smith writes:—

Isolde Wigram is right, in view of my article, to question the note of Anne Sutton and Livia Visser-Fuchs. In the explanation of their note, they put forward a different view of the 'deprivation' of Elizabeth Woodville and her involvement in the Lambert Simnel rebellion.

On the problem of the 'deprivation', it is claimed that Polydore Vergil's account was a coloured description of Elizabeth Woodville's estates being passed over to her daughter the new queen, and that the document arranging this was unexceptionable. This claim does not seem immediately obvious from the passage from Vergil quoted by Anne Sutton and Livia Visser-Fuchs. Henry VII's action hardly looks like one of the 'improvements in public administration', but rather one of 'other matters' beside those improvements. Vergil's reasons for her 'deprivation' may not have been those of Henry's council of February 1487, but the sense of the passage suggests that Vergil thought they were. From the evidence of the text, he was giving reasons ('This was done because'), and not just retelling Elizabeth Woodville's 'past history of political expedients'.

It is true that there is no specific statement in Vergil that Elizabeth Woodville's fate was caused by her sympathy with the Simnel revolt. Nevertheless the listing of Elizabeth's past betrayals of Henry, coupled with her 'deprivation' as a warning to others to keep faith, could be seen as an oblique reference to a suspicion that she was involved in the present troubles. There is also the intriguing point that Elizabeth's 'deprivation' occupies most of folio 240, which is an insertion in Vergil's manuscript text. The insertion starts after the pardons extended to Lovel and others, and mentions the decision to show Warwick, and the improvements in public administration. Then there follows the 'deprivation' in the passage quoted, the ending of which nearly coincides with that of folio 240. The insertion actually ends with: 'But to revert to our narrative. The King, having dismissed his council'. This ending forms a bridge passage back to the main text, which continues with the exhibition of Warwick.

An examination of the text without folio 240 would suggest that Vergil made

the insertion on purpose, rather than as the result of omission. If the contents of folio 240 are omitted, and the sentences are quoted from either side of the insertion, the result is as follows: 'Accordingly the king at once by proclamation pardoned and excused from punishment all who were accused of treason or any other crimes. [He] came to London and on the following Sunday ordered Edward the duke of Clarence's son to be led from the Tower through the centre of the city to St. Paul's Cathedral.' The manuscript text without folio 240 is thus a continuous narrative, and reconsidering the insertion is instructive. The decision to show Warwick mentioned in folio 240 is presupposed by his actual exhibition in the main text, and is therefore hardly new material, and the sentence on improvements in public administration and the bridge passage are unimportant. The important remainder is Vergil's account of Elizabeth Woodville's 'deprivation', which he dropped into his narrative of the Simnel rebellion. This might indicate that Vergil was suspicious of Elizabeth's connection with the revolt.

In one sense at least, Vergil's 'deprivation' supports the evidence of a transfer of estates from Elizabeth Woodville to her daughter Elizabeth of York. Kendall states that Henry VII from the first only allowed the mother her widow's jointure, and then at Sheen in 1487 'abruptly stripped Elizabeth Woodville of her modest possessions.' Such a fall from a meagre estate to poverty does not correspond to Vergil's moral point, unless he was looking at her riches as queen to Edward IV, which seems implausible. Elizabeth Woodville's possession of the queen's estates before Sheen fits Vergil's point, and the legal transfer of these from her, as queen dowager, to the new queen would imply that the dowager was not being openly punished. How much further this evidence can be pressed is, however, debatable. Possibly the lords summoned to Sheen wanted full honours for Elizabeth of York, but such honours would include crowning, which was not conceded by Henry VII until after the Simnel rebellion. The transfer of estates from the dowager to daughter to the detriment of the dowager is unlikely to have impressed either the lords summoned by Henry or Lovel and other dissidents.

It is reasonable, of course, that 'Elizabeth could only expect the much reduced estate of a queen dowager', but reduced by how much? Elizabeth Woodville might have expected at least 700 marks a year, which was the annuity promised by her by her old enemy Richard III. Her son-in-law Henry VII gave her 400 marks a year, and her will suggests that she died in penury. It would perhaps be invidious to make comparisons without knowing the full details of her finances, but Henry's provision for his mother-in-law could hardly be regarded as generous. If Henry had made her a handsome settlement in lieu of the transfer of her estates to his wife, Vergil could not have described Elizabeth as 'deprived'. Even with the new evidence of the transfer, one can appreciate Vergil's point, although strictly in the circumstances he does not use the right word.

Similarly 'imprisonment' may not be quite the right word for Elizabeth Woodville's stay at Bermondsey. Religious establishments differ from courts because the inmates are not so likely as courtiers to be involved in plots. Restricted access to such establishments would mean that visitors could be watched, and Bermondsey was close enough for Henry VII to check that the watchers were doing their job. The notion that the queen dowager was under surveillance fits Bacon's report that it was considered dangerous to try to see or talk with her.

The findings of Anne Sutton and Livia Visser-Fuchs are open to a number of interpretations. It could be, as they suggest, that Elizabeth Woodville was not involved in the Simnel rebellion, although Bacon clearly thought she was, and the context indicated by Isolde Wigram also seems to be against her. Perhaps the dowager was being watched because, though she was not engaging in conspiracy, Henry VII thought she was dangerous, and took preventive action. The findings prompt reflection on the Tudor's behaviour too. The traditional view is that Henry deprived and imprisoned Elizabeth Woodville, and did it rather unskilfully. The findings would seem to imply, however, that he did it in such a way that people would find objecting to the 'deprivation' and 'imprisonment' difficult. In this instance Henry's handling turns out to be subtle, and cynics would say it restores one's faith in the Tudor's reputation for duplicity.

Sources used: *The Anglica Historia of Polydore Vergil AD 1485-1537*, ed. and trans. D. Hay, Camden Soc. vol. 74 (1950), pp. 16-19. Paul Murray Kendall, *Richard the Third*, London 1955, pp. 414-5. Francis Bacon, *The History of the Reign of King Henry the Seventh*, ed. R. Lockyer, London 1971, pp. 59-60.)

Anne F. Sutton and Livia Visser-Fuchs write:—

The question whether Elizabeth Woodville was or was not actively involved in the Simnel rebellion is a problem about the interpretation of extremely poor sources, what they actually tell us and what we, the historians, are allowed to assume from, and beyond, their information. A matter of facts versus speculation. If one is concerned to argue, as Gordon Smith does very intricately and intriguingly, that Lambert Simnel was a son of Edward IV, then it is attractive, though by no means essential, to suggest that the boy's mother was deeply involved.

Virgil recounts that Henry summoned a special council of nobles — not his usual council — at Shene palace, because of his concern over the Simnel plot. The first matter dealt with was a series of pardons to certain persons, such as Lord Lovel, lest they should join other conspiracies; and secondly the earl of Warwick was to be shown to the people to disprove the allegation he was in Ireland. Virgil then very clearly indicates that the council turned to more ordinary ordinances, concerned with improvements in public administration. Among other matters Elizabeth the widow of King Edward was deprived [*multata*] by the

. decree of the same council of all her possessions. This was done because she had made her peace with King Richard; had placed her daughters at his disposal; and had, by leaving sanctuary, broken her promise to those (mainly of the nobility) who had, at her own most urgent entreaty, forsaken their own English property and fled to Henry in Brittany, the latter having pledged himself to marry her elder daughter Elizabeth. Since it had not been for want of effort on her part that the marriage had not failed to come about, and that she was accordingly deprived [*privata*] of the income from her estates, so that she should offer an example to others to keep faith. Such is the inconstancy of human affairs, that one may regularly see those who were yesterday accounted most wealthy and fortunate, today leading lives of misery, destitute of every possession. But to revert to our narrative. . . .'

There is no certainty that the reasons given by Vergil for her 'deprivation' were those of the council rather than his own retelling of Elizabeth's past history of political expedients; at no point does he say specifically that the 'deprivation' was caused by her involvement or sympathy with the Simnel revolt, and why should he not have added this detail if he had known or suspected it?

This may also be the place to remind Ricardians that Vergil later amended his text and that this new version is very different. The text used above is that of his manuscript 'edition', finished around 1513 — twenty-six years after the event and during the reign of Henry VIII. This 'edition' may not have been widely known; only one copy survives, which belonged to his grand-nephew and is now in the Vatican Library. For the first printed edition (1534) Vergil substantially rewrote his history, probably between 1521 and *circa* 1524; it must be assumed that he meant to *improve* his text. This new version has been used in the present argument for the story about Dorset's imprisonment (see Isolde Wigram's note). Concerning Elizabeth Woodville the improved text runs thus, in translation:

Among other things Elizabeth, once the wife of King Edward IV, was deprived of all her possessions, for the reason that she had entrusted herself and her daughters to King Richard, and, going completely against the drift of the agreement formed against Richard, she drew away from those nobles who left behind, at her request in particular, all the lands they had in England, fled to Henry, sailed to Brittany, and demanded from him an oath by which he obliged himself to marry her eldest daughter. It was no thanks to her that this did not fail and that the nobles that followed Henry did not remain in exile forever! This was certainly a grave crime, but its result should not have been punished by the law at all, because far from doing any harm to other men or Henry, it helped them and made Richard bold enough to pile crime upon crime and ignore the laws of the church by attempting to marry his niece. In this way he increased God's anger against him, which led to his ruin. From this we

can see that evil men are not punished by the judgment of a human judge, but by God's will, through which they rush themselves, as it were, toward their deserved end. The queen, because of her inconstancy, came to be much hated, and she suffered, leading a miserable life from then on. Such is human life, that sometimes when things go with us they actually are about to collapse, sometimes when they are against us they are positive, so that those who 'have' should not expect to enjoy what they have for long, and those that 'have not' should not despair. One action of Queen Elizabeth fate cannot make less valuable: when her husband Edward was still king, she founded on a splendid location in Cambridge a college for scholars and she gave it funds for their maintenance. It is called the college of the queen and it deserves that name because it has always been full of very learned men, educated there by studying assiduously.

After this long excursion Vergil — like in the manuscript text — 'returns' to his story.

Several things may be noticed: Vergil no longer says that the decision was taken by the council, nor that it was made to 'improve' administration; he seems to be even less concerned about Henry and more about the nobles that followed him; he seems to imply that Elizabeth should not have been punished; he is even more concerned to draw general lessons from her life and from Richard's career; in this very detailed passage he certainly does not appear to be omitting or 'covering up' anything — by now it was almost forty years after the event — or hiding superior knowledge; he also still does not consider the story of Elizabeth relevant to the main narrative and makes no link between them, saying that he will now 'return' to his narrative. He is simply telling us what was said and believed at the time and enjoys philosophising about life, fortune, good and evil.

The so called 'deprivation' was, in any case, not an unusual act and would have been expected by Elizabeth: her daughter had married Henry 18 January 1486 and produced an heir on 20 September and, although not crowned until 25 November 1487, she was entitled to a substantial dower, which was likely to be made up from the same estates as has been held by the previous queen, who in this case was her mother — if Anne Neville's brief tenure be ignored. Over the centuries, some dowager queens had been generously treated by the new king, some had not. By 1487 certain estates, notably portions of the duchy of Lancaster had become traditionally associated with the queen's estate, having been held by both Margaret of Anjou and Elizabeth Woodville. The endowment of Elizabeth of York, daughter of Edward IV, with full honours as queen, may have been high among the demands of the lords summoned together by Henry, and fits very well with their concern to pardon and bring into the fold men, such as Lovel, who were still dissident. As the dowager, Elizabeth could only expect the much reduced estate of a queen dowager. The word 'deprived' (*multata*, despoiled, 'milked') creates a slightly misleading impression, and this was no doubt Vergil's intention, in order to endorse the moral

point which he goes on to make: the mighty fall and the rich become destitute, etc. History was expected to teach such lessons. 'The dowager queen's estates were passed over to the new queen' would be the modern way of expressing the situation.

The text of the other relevant document relating to Elizabeth Woodville's possessions also has no overtones, but is couched in the common form of official documents (*pace* Gordon Smith, his note 70):

Henry by the grace of God, etc. To the treasurer and chamberlains of our Eschequier ... greting. Wher as of late by thadvise of the lords and other nobles of our counsaill for divers consideracions us and theym moevyng have seased into our hands all honors, castelles, manoirs, lordships, knights fees, advousons, and alle othr lands and tenements, with their apportenaunces and all maner fefermes and annuitees by us late assigned unto Queene Elizabeth, late wif to the full noble prince of famous memorye Edward the Fourth, and all and every of the saide honoures, castells, ... have assigned unto our derrest wif the queene....

And so on with instructions to the officers concerned, dated at Coventry, 1 May 1487.

The choice of Bermondsey, as we have stated before, cannot really be seen as an unpleasant one for Elizabeth as it was on the Thames and a short boat journey from the palaces of Westminster, Greenwich and Shene. Other queen dowagers had ended their days within the precincts of religious establishments and in no way can Bermondsey be regarded as a prison: Elizabeth could have indulged in treason as easily from there as any other place, if that is what she wanted to do. If Henry had thought it desirable to confine her, would not 'deepest Wales' have been more suitable than a London suburb?

Finally, it is not necessary to assume either a deprivation or an imprisonment to support a speculation that Elizabeth Woodville was involved in either the Simnel or Warbeck conspiracies, she only had to be the pretender's mother.

(Sources used: *The Anglica Historia of Polydore Vergil, AD 1485-1537*, ed and trans. D. Hay, Camden Society, vol. 74 (1950), pp. xiii-xvii, 16-19 and nn. The letter, W. Campbell, ed., *Materials for a History of the Reign of Henry VII*, 2 vols, Rolls Series, London 1875-77, vol. 2, pp. 148-49. Endowment: e.g. Anne Crawford, 'The king's burden?', *Patronage, the Crown and the Provinces in Later Medieval England*, ed R.A. Griffiths, Gloucester 1981, pp. 40-47.)

Edward of Middleham

Peter Hammond writes:—

I was most interested to read the article 'One Prince or Two' by Gordon Smith (*Ricardian*, vol. 11, no. 144, March 1999, pp. 467-68), since in 1970 in my brief life of Edward of Middleham I also came to the conclusion that Richard's son had been born in 1476. I argued from the probable date of the marriage of his parents

and Edward's age as given by Rous. I did not at the time notice the ambiguous reference in the Tewkesbury Chronicle but agree with Mr Smith that it undoubtedly refers to Edward being born in 1476.

The date of the marriage of Anne Neville and Richard of Gloucester is not known precisely. It is tied up with the quarrel between Clarence and Gloucester over Richard's wish to marry Anne; Clarence did not wish to share the Neville/Warwick lands with his brother. There are three references to their quarrel, in February 1472, in autumn of the same year and in early November 1473 (*Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Norman Davis, vol.1, 1971, pp. 447, 468; *The Crowland Chronicle Continuations 1459-1486*, ed. Nicholas Pronay & John Cox, 1986, pp. 130/132). We know that Anne and Richard were not married before this last date because by 22 November 1473 the king had settled the quarrel himself and awarded to Gloucester such lands as should be agreed between his two brothers after Gloucester had married Anne Neville (*Crowland Chronicle*, p. 132; *Paston Letters*, vol. 1, p. 472). Richard and Anne were therefore married after late 1473, probably early in 1474. Support for this year is found in *Hearne's Fragment*, a chronicle written from memory early in the sixteenth century, which says 'the which Anne was weddid to Ric. duke of Gloucestre aftir in the yere of our lorde M.CCCC.LXXIII at Westmonstre'. We know that it was before 6 June in 1474 which is the date of a patent confirming the final distribution of the Warwick lands (*A Remarkable Fragment of an old English Chronicle*, ed. Thomas Hearne, 1715, p. 304; C.L. Kingsford, *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century*, 1913, pp. 177-78; *CPR 1467-77*, p. 455) The first official reference to Edward of Middleham is in a request on 10 April 1477 for prayers to be said for the 'king and his consort and the king's brother Richard duke of Gloucester and Anne his consort and Edward their son' (*CPR 1476-85*, p. 34) Such a reference to Edward perhaps shows that he had only recently been born, that is late in 1476. He need not have been their first child of course, just the only one living at that date.

Together with Mr Smith's evidence it therefore seems certain that Richard of Gloucester and Anne Neville were married in 1474 and their son Edward was born in 1476.