

Lady Eleanor Butler and John Crowne's *The Misery of Civil War* (1680)

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For an audience in the early spring of 1680 the title of John Crowne's play must have seemed unnervingly topical.¹ It was most probably produced during the anxious months between the third and fourth parliaments of Charles II's reign, in both of which legislative attempts were made to exclude his catholic brother, James, from the succession; in fact the years between 1679 and 1681 are generally referred to as those of the Exclusion Crisis. This was also the period in which murderous social hysteria, generated more than a year before by Titus Oates' claims to have discovered a 'Popish Plot' to murder the king, reached its height, and the time in which the terms 'Whig' and 'Tory' first entered the national vocabulary, as stark political lines were drawn between people's allegiances. The play is in fact an adaptation of parts of Shakespeare's 2 and 3 *Henry VI*, its plot opening with Jack Cade's rebellion, and then harking back to Henry IV's usurpation as it enacts the ousting of Henry VI by the Yorkist faction while presaging the murderous activities of Shakespeare's Richard III. Insurrection and usurpation must have been dangerous topics in 1680 and, given that another play about usurpation (Nahum Tate's version of *Richard II*) was itself to be banned a year later, it is perhaps hardly surprising that Crowne's play may have had only one performance.²

¹ *The London Stage*, Part 1: 1600-1700, ed. W. Van Lennep, Carbondale 1965, p. 283, gives February 1680 as the likely month for the play's performance, by the Duke's Company at their Dorset Garden theatre, since there is a record of a contemporary copy purchased in March. John Crowne was probably born in Shropshire in 1640, but emigrated to Nova Scotia with his family in 1656; they had to return in the 1660s after their land was ceded to the French. Despite his sense of grievance over this confiscation, and the strongly anti-catholic bias in these history plays, 'he had a sincere affection for the king [but] yet a mortal aversion to the court', wrote John Dennis, in a letter of 1719. *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. E.N. Hooker, 2 vols., Baltimore 1939-43, vol. 2, p. 405.

² *The Misery of Civil War* was reprinted in 1681 as *Henry the Sixth, The Second Part*; or, *The Misery of Civil War*; its registration is contained in *The Term Catalogues 1668-1709*, ed. E. Arber, 3 vols., London 1903-6. Nahum Tate, poet laureate from 1691, is better known for his version of *King Lear* (1681) with a happy ending although, to churchgoers, he is familiar also for the metricised psalms, composed with Nicholas Brady.

Some playwrights who dealt in dangerous subjects at this time hid behind their source material for protection, but Crowne was not one of them. In the Prologue he untruthfully declared that the play was created by his own skill alone: 'The divine Shakespear did not lay one stone' of its structure. Certainly if those who saw the play at this time and those who read it later were unfamiliar with their Shakespeare, and had taken these words at face value, they would not have been aware that the play in fact relies heavily on the last two acts of 2 *Henry VI* and all of 3 *Henry VI*. In making this adaptation Crowne chose in particular to interpolate personal motives for some of the political events – most notably those of lust, jealousy, and revenge – in the private lives of Warwick (played by the great Betterton) and the young and amorous Edward (played by William Smith, one for a swashbuckling part).³ Edward's emotional entanglements are further complicated by Crowne's creation of a new role for Elizabeth Curren, that of Lady Elianor Butler 'a young lady of great quality, that was one of King Edward's mistresses'.⁴

Commentators on the play have hitherto made little of this part, generally referring to it simply as interpolated for love interest and to provide the amusement of a breeches part for those such as Pepys, who loved such things.⁵

³ Thomas Betterton (1635-1710) was the greatest actor of the period, indeed one of the greatest of all time. He had been a sharer with the Duke's Company from 1660 and, when he undertook major Shakespearean roles at this time, many in adapted plays, he was approaching his prime. He would have brought to the role of Warwick the serious, venerable, and majestic mien which contemporaries describe, although – from the roles he played – it is quite clear that Warwick's other aspects were well within his range. William Smith (d. 1695) was with the Duke's Company possibly as early as 1661 and became a leading actor with the company, a sharer after 1674, and co-manager with Betterton after 1677. The role of the adulterous Suffolk in Crowne's second adaptation of Shakespearean history was to follow in 1681.

⁴ From the *Dramatis Personae* of *The Misery of Civil War*, printed in London, 1680, and reproduced in a Cornmarket Facsimile of 1969. Despite the play's stress on oath-taking, Crowne avoids making an overt judgement on Elianor's marital status by describing her here as a mistress. Elizabeth Howe, *The First English Actresses*, Cambridge 1992, pp. 78-79, 101-02, 129, stresses Elizabeth Curren's specialist roles as 'robust and cunning' manipulators, her breeches roles, and parts as 'tough professional' mistresses; she played other sorts too, however, including young girls and wives.

⁵ F.W. Kilbourne, *Alterations and Adaptations of Shakespeare*, Boston 1906, p. 105; G. Sorelius, *The Giant Race Before the Flood*, Uppsala 1966, p. 193; J. Marsden, *The Re-Imagined Text*, Lexington 1995, p. 30. Her role in the plot is noted by G.C.D. Odell, *Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving*, London 1920, vol. 1, p. 66; H. Spencer, *Shakespeare Improved*, New York 1927, facsimile reprint, 1963, pp. 303-04, 306-07; B.A. Murray, *Restoration Shakespeare*, Cranbury, N.J. 2001, p. 137. A.F. White, *John Crowne: His Life and Dramatic Works*, Cleveland 1922, pp. 111-12, alone notes her historical existence. S. Owen, *Restoration Theatre and Crisis*, Oxford 1996, p. 80, finds anxiety about royal promiscuity acknowledged and contained by the part. Nancy Klein Maguire, in

What this paper intends to make clear, however, is that Lady Eleanor Butler is referred to in early historical documents, that the assertion of Edward's pre-contract with her was a crucial factor in the legitimising of Richard III's claim to the throne, and that, following the suppression of this information in the reign of Henry VII, it had become more freely available in the seventeenth century.⁶ Her part constitutes much more than a piece of simple and vapid love interest for an actress with attractive legs; hers is a theatrically vivid and dramatically turbulent role and, indeed, Crowne added a scene for her in all save the first act. Through the part he is quite clearly demonstrating a lesson from history: royal philandering may draw in innocent victims to their destruction but, more potently, may have unforeseen and direct political consequences.

Dame Eleanor Butler first appeared in the petition to Richard of Gloucester in June 1483 by the three estates 'out of parliament', ratified six months later 'in the form of parliament' in January 1484. The petition denied the legitimacy of the two young princes, Richard's nephews, on the grounds that the marriage of their father, Edward, to Lady Grey (Elizabeth Woodville) was bigamous, for 'at the time of contract of the same pretended marriage [to Elizabeth], and before and long time after, the said King Edward was and stood married and troth plight to one Dame Elianore Butteler ...'.⁷ In the

'Factionary Politics: John Crowne's *Henry VI*', in G. Maclean ed., *Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration*, Cambridge 1995, p. 75, looks more closely for contemporary political parallels: "Lady Elianor" [*sic*] glances at both Charles's victimized Catholic Queen and his popular Protestant mistress Nell Gwyn' (p. 79); 'Crowne ... transmogrifies Edward into a gross womanizer ... [he] uses his new female character, the Lady Eleanor Butler, to belabour Charles's sexual infidelities ...' (p. 80); Richard's comment, taken from a hint at *Richard III* III.ii.5, that he will 'bastardize' Edward's children, is reckoned to be in support of the legitimising of Monmouth.

⁶ A.N. Kincaid, ed., in Sir George Buck's *The History of King Richard the Third* (1619), Gloucester 1979, pp. 300-02, considers that there is no way of knowing whether a trothplight with Edward ever took place in fact. He reckons that Lady Eleanor was 'probably daughter to John Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury who died in 1460' although 'it is not impossible that she was daughter to the famous John Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury' who died in 1454. She 'married Thomas Boteler at sometime after 1450, was predeceased by her husband, and died in 1468'. Her history and family background are given by John Ashdown-Hill in 'Edward IV's uncrowned queen: the Lady Eleanor Talbot, Lady Butler', *The Ricardian*, vol. 11, no. 139, December 1997, pp. 166-90. I should like to record my gratitude to Ann J. Kettle of the Department of Mediaeval History at the University of St Andrews for much helpful advice over my reading for this essay.

⁷ Cited by A. Hanham, *Richard III and his Early Historians, 1483-1535*, Oxford 1975, p. 45. Mortimer Levine, *Tudor Dynastic Problems 1460-1571*, London and New York 1973, p. 28, gives the inception of the charge of the bastardy of Edward's children to Friar Ralph Shaa in a sermon preached in London on 22 June 1483; Jeremy Potter,

seventeenth century she appeared again in Sir George Buck's *The History of King Richard the Third* of 1619. Buck quoted in particular from a contemporary source, the 'second continuation' of the *Crowland Chronicle*, which charts the history of the Yorkist dynasty from 1459 to the coronation of Henry VII in 1485. Buck rehearsed the argument of the act of settlement of January 1484 which defined Richard's title to the throne; this document is generally referred to as *Titulus Regis*.⁸ Buck himself also quoted from the *Crowland Chronicle*: '*fili Regis Edwardi erant bastardi, supponendo illum praecontraxisse matrimonium cum quadam domina Alienaora Boteler ...*'⁹ He also referred to Richard's first parliament where Edward's marriage was debated and adjudged unlawful, 'be[cause he was formerly contr]acted and also married to the Lady [Eleanor Talbot, daughter of the old Earl of Shrewsbury, and relict to the Lord Butler of Sudely, then living and long after.]'. He also quoted from Philip de Commynes: Edward 'was *firmy and* [sole]m[n]ly contracted and also married to [Lady Eleanor Talbot ... widow of Thomas [Lord Butler,] Baron Sudeley]'; and cited 'stories and chronicles' that he considers 'err not' that Edward's mother had exhorted her eldest son to 'finish and [consummate] with public ceremonies that his contract with the Lady Elizabeth Talbot, alias Butler (*italics sic*)'.¹⁰ Crowne must have known of this figure, then, from Sir George Buck, or possibly from the re-issue of the *History* by his step-great-nephew, George Buck Esquire, in 1646 and 1647. The editors of *The Crowland Chronicle Continuations, 1459-1486* make clear that many more of the great antiquarian scholars of the seventeenth century may have known of the *Chronicle* but make either little, or no, reference to it; these include William Dugdale, Edmond Howes, Francis Sandford, John Speed, Henry Spelman, and John Stow. Crowne would not have heard of Lady Eleanor, therefore, from them.¹¹

however, in *Good King Richard?*, London 1983, p. 41, considers that the issue of the precontract might have been raised by Bishop Stillington as early as 9 June.

⁸ Hanham, *Richard III*, p. 96.

⁹ Kincaid, ed. *The History*, p. 46.

¹⁰ Kincaid, ed. *The History*, pp. 176 and 179. Buck also gives the end of Lady Eleanor: 'she was greatly grieved, [by news of Edward's marriage to Lady Grey] and she lived a melancholic and heavy and solitary life ever aft[er], and how sh[e] died is not certainly known, but it is out of doubt that the king [killed her no]t with kindness', pp. 182-83. In Crowne's play Edward certainly kills her – not with kindness! As far as the exoneration of Richard was concerned, the editors of *The Crowland Chronicle*, N. Pronay and J. Cox, consider that 'Buck was a man with a bee in his bonnet, an evangelist for a self-appointed cause, and his work is thoroughly tendentious', *The Crowland Chronicle Continuations, 1459-1486*, London 1986, p. 4; Kincaid, however, concludes the introduction to his edition with the view that Buck made a 'shrewd analysis' and 'cool examination' of Richard's reputation, the final assessment of which was 'balanced and judicious', Kincaid, ed. *The History*, pp. cxxviii-cxxix.

¹¹ Pronay and Cox eds., *Chronicle*, p. 5. Crowne did not derive his information from

That Crowne's Lady Elianor Butler is meant to represent more than a touch of sensational love-interest is clear from the terms of her part in Crowne's play. She first appears in act 2 when she is pulled by Edward into the intimate space of 'a room in London' with a table and lights specified, suggesting something of the naughtiness of midnight feasts, at least. Edward has 'sworn' faith to her, made 'oaths' and 'vows of constancy'; he himself would be a 'perjur'd villain', he says, to cast her off, and he 'swears' she shall always have his love. The passage is riddled with the language of oath-swearing and word-giving. In act 3 she appears on the field of Wakefield 'in a riding dress', reminding him that she has given him her 'hand and heart for ever'; she is his 'wife in hopes and promises'. Indeed in the following act, while contemplating his brother's impending marriage to Elizabeth Grey (or Woodville), Richard himself is to comment that he hopes Edward will go through with it 'because / I'm told he has another wife, if so, / The children of this marriage must be bastards. / ... I'll bastardize his children; / Then am I king'.¹² The ceremony itself is conducted, with an extended interruption by an irate Lady Elianor, in the next scene (act 4). Here she accuses him of sinning 'even to marriage' with Elizabeth, even after 'all the oaths [he has] sworn' to herself. He can have, he tells her, 'a dispensation from his Holiness' – exactly the remedy Sir George Buck himself insists that Edward could have obtained.¹³ Lady Elianor contemptuously taunts Elizabeth with her assertion that Edward has only 'pick'd the name of wife / Out of [Lady Elianor's] marriage sheet's [sic] to hide [Elizabeth's] shame with'. There are hints here that both Edward and Elianor regard themselves as in some sense legally bound.¹⁴ Finally, Lady Elianor ap-

several other earlier historians either. William Camden (1551-1623) refers to Elizabeth as Edward's wife in *Remains Concerning Britain* (1614), ed. R.D. Dunn, Toronto, Buffalo and London 1984, p. 161; the editor has to annotate Edward's jocular but unspecific references to his three mistresses (p. 245) that they were Jane Shore, Eleanor Butler, and Elizabeth Lucy (p. 450). Nicholas Harpsfield (?1519-1575) in the *Historia Anglicana Ecclesiastica* (Douai 1622) lists 'Croulandensis historia' among his sources, but the Butler episode does not appear to feature in his account of the fifteenth century, either in 'De Edovardo quarto & quinto, & Ricardo tertio. Caput vi', pp. 597-603, or in 'De Henrico septimo, Caput vii', pp. 604-07. A.R. Myers discusses the work of Buck, as well as touching on William Cornwallis's *The Praise of King Richard III*, (1617), a rhetorical exercise in defending the indefensible, in 'Richard III and historical tradition', *History*, vol. 53, no. 178, June 1968, pp. 181-202. *Titulus Regius* was published by William Prynne as a tract against Oliver Cromwell in 1657, and Crowne could therefore have encountered (on p. 5) a reference to the precontract with Dame Elinor; it was published as *Richard the Third Revived* and printed for William Leak, at the Crown in Fleetstreet, 1657.

¹² This was exactly the effect of the *Titulus Regius*.

¹³ Kincaid, ed. *The History*, p. 185.

¹⁴ According to John Ashdown-Hill in 'Edward IV's uncrowned queen', p. 173, all

pears (act 5) on the field of Barnet 'in man's habit', and calls on Edward to fight; she falls and dies by his hand, but not before reminding him that her injuries have found him out, 'Have driven thee from thy throne, how far will drive thee, I cannot tell ... May heaven forgive thy broken vows', she says. After her death he comments ruefully, and with belated foresight, 'Thy wrongs I fear will haunt my mind and fortune, ' In this sweet spot of earth I fear I've planted / Much mischief for my self; I gather'd all / The sweets, and now thorns will spring up to tear me'. There have been oaths, she has regarded herself as married, and – although this play does not explore them further – his neglect of this is about to generate untold difficulties.

Although Edward IV and Charles II were undoubtedly a pair of royal philanderers, close parallels between their stories do not really work, and commentators on the historical dramas of the Exclusion Crisis period are usually cautious about making such parallels. Eleanor Butler may have been Edward's precontracted wife, Lucy Walter (despite claims) was not Charles's.¹⁵ Eleanor Butler appears to have borne Edward no children, whereas the highly visible and contentious figure of Monmouth was the product of Charles's union with Lucy.¹⁶ Edward's wife, Elizabeth Woodville, bore him ten children, whereas the wife of Charles, Catherine of Braganza, was childless. Proof of a precontract between Edward and Eleanor, and thus the 'bastardising' of his nephews, was greatly in the interest of Edward's brother Richard of Gloucester, but the last thing Charles's brother, James Duke of York, would have wanted, was evidence of marriage contract between his brother and Lucy Walter, which would have legitimised Monmouth and thus his claim to the succession.¹⁷

'that was actually required [by the canon law of the time] for a precontract was a promise of marriage, followed by sexual intercourse'; Lady Elianor capitulates to Edward's importunity in act 3.

¹⁵ H.A. Kelly, 'The case against Edward IV's marriage and offspring', *The Ricardian*, vol. 11, no. 142, September 1998, p. 327, makes clear that 'precontract' means '*previous marriage*' when alleged as a challenge to a subsequent marriage.

¹⁶ Debate over Eleanor's fertility is touched on by Muriel Smith, 'Reflections on Lady Eleanor', *The Ricardian*, vol. 11, no. 142, September 1998, p. 337, and John Ashdown-Hill, 'Further reflections', *The Ricardian*, vol. 11, no. 144, March 1999, p. 466.

¹⁷ Political capital had been made out of the supposed marriage of Charles to Lucy Walter from at least as early as 1662. Twice in early 1679 Charles had made a formal declaration to his councillors that he had been neither contracted nor married to any woman but Catherine; a year later – at the time of Crowne's play – speculation was still rife about the contents of a 'black box' in which the secret marriage papers were said to be held. On 8 June Charles published a disavowal of any such contract, and on 10 June Robert 'the Plotter' Ferguson published *A letter to a person of honour, concerning the Kings disavowing the having been married to the D[uke] of M[onmouth]'s mother*. Here Ferguson, the Whiggish pamphleteer and exclusionist, illustrates a trenchantly expressed view that

So why should Crowne have introduced this historical personage and so carefully have constructed the legal implications of her part which, it is true, otherwise contains many of the popular features of female roles played by women since 1660: temptation to sin with a powerful male, physical vulnerability, heartless abandonment, the male disguise, and a pathetic death invoking remorse? The part is therefore far more than mere love interest and pathos. In its deployment of historical information made available to the seventeenth century by Sir George Buck (increasingly deployed for political purposes in these difficult months), and specifically in its stress on the language of promise-making and oath-breaking between Edward and Elianor, it might be thought of as an early artistic attempt to rehabilitate the reputation of Richard III. It is clearly not this, however, since Richard is elsewhere the dangerous and manipulative hunchback of Crowne's Shakespearean source who intends, early on, to use knowledge of the rumour of a previous contract to his own advantage.¹⁸

The great historiographical flowering of the seventeenth century may have had its roots in the pragmatic development of post-renaissance statecraft, and certainly the middle ages themselves were still present both in the government of state and in the legal processes of common life.¹⁹ John Crowne, however,

there is a precedent for the disavowal of such a contract: 'The person I mean is Edw. the fourth, who being a sprightly and amorous prince, was suddenly contracted and married to Elianor Talbot ... Now Ed. 4. finding thereupon admission into the embraces of the Lady, and having satiated himself a while by secret injoyments ... he did some years after ... deny what was so solemnly transacted'. Crowne could not have read Ferguson's pamphlet before he wrote the play, but the story and its contemporary comparison was obviously rife, and – with the 'secret injoyments' and 'embraces' of his 'sprightly and amorous prince' – Ferguson the Whig pamphleteer may even have been deploying, without conscience, some of the racier effects of Crowne the Tory playwright.

¹⁸ The villainous Richard was independently known to Restoration audiences; both A.R. Myers ('Richard III and historical tradition', p. 188), and Jeremy Potter (*Good King Richard?*, p. 174), mention John Caryl's *The English Princess or The Death of Richard III* which Pepys saw played by the Duke's Company on 7 March 1667 (n.s.); Myers also reckons that the discovery of the bones in the Tower of London in 1674 'seemed to contemporaries to be a striking corroboration of More's story'. Readers of history would have found the 'monster in nature' in Baker's *Chronicles of the Kings of England* (1643), and a perpetrator of 'foulest facts' in Fuller's *Church History of Britain* (1655), both cited by Jeremy Potter (*Good King Richard?*, pp. 141 and 164).

¹⁹ Philip Styles in 'Politics and Historical Research in the Early Seventeenth Century', in Levi Fox, ed., *Historical Scholarship in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, London and New York 1956, pp. 49-72. David C. Douglas in *English Scholars 1660-1730*; London 1939, 2nd ed. revised 1951, pp. 14-15 finds that: 'statesmen of all parties, and the leaders of all opinions, turned more instinctively to the past in order to discover therein a solution to the problems of the present ... they went to the past for their arguments'.

was looking to the past, not for complex political or legal precedents of any sort, but to illustrate something timeless about the simple human fallibility of rulers. The way in which history demonstrates how a monarch's claim to the throne may be invalidated in favour of another's is not the point of Crowne's new material; rather the strong creation of this new female role carries a warning for the private life of kings. Use of the Elianor Butler episode shares with other plays of the period, and of course with Shakespeare's Henry VI plays themselves, the effect of powerfully illustrating the way in which private lives may be damaged by the wanton activities of great ones. It also shows how the apparently trivial and negligible private actions of a king may have dire public and political consequences, a strong message by a Tory playwright for his own time. Although information was available to Crowne to exonerate Richard, he chose instead to retain a version of the Shakespearean villain.²⁰ The historical material available to him is deployed, not for the benefit of Richard's memory, but as a lesson for Crowne's own times; just as the precontract argument had earlier been suppressed by chroniclers to serve ambitious Tudor interests, so now it is given vigorous life by a dramatist as an object lesson for wayward Stuarts.

²⁰ William Winstanley's list of authors cited includes 'Cambden', Seldon, Speed, Stow, 'Harpseild' and 'Mr Buck'. His *Life* of Richard offers a warning against the tradition established by 'Sir Tho. Moore' and itself constitutes a sustained eulogy of Richard, although the precontract itself is not mentioned, rather 'King Edwards Children ... were adjudged incapable of Government', W. Winstanley, *England's Worthies. Select Lives of the most Eminent Persons of the English Nation from Constantine the Great Down to these times*, London, printed by J.C. and F.C. for Obadiah Blagrave, at the Bear in St Paul's Church-yard, 1684, first printed 1660, p. 174.