ISSN: 2349-2147

Modern Research Studies

An International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
An Indexed & Refereed e-Journal
www.modernresearch.in

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Volume 2, Issue 1
March 2015

pp. 98–107.

Email: editor@modernresearch.in
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ISSN: 2349-2147
Modern Research Studies:
An International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

John Ford's *Perkin Warbeck*: The Origin of the Uncertainty

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Abstract: The lasting impression that one gets from reading John Ford's play *The Chronicle History of Perkin Warbeck* is one of uncertainty about the identity of its eponymous character. This paper offers an examination of the playwright's education, his sources, and his play, with a view to finding out the origin of this uncertainty. The paper argues that the legally-trained Ford has deliberately created this uncertainty, taking his cue from one of the main sources of the play, *The History of the Reign of King Henry VII* (1622) by Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626). Ford, the paper concludes, succeeds not only in dramatizing the idea he found in Bacon but also in airing his political views.

Keywords: Caroline drama, chronicle plays, Francis Bacon, John Ford, *Perkin Warbeck*

It has been said that the story of the English history-play ends with *The Chronicle History of Perkin Warbeck: A Strange Truth* (1634) by John Ford (Ribner 297; Miles 395). Born in Devonshire, Ford was admitted to the Middle Temple, one of the Inns of Court, on 16

November 1602 (Sergeaunt 2). These Inns, which Ben Jonson lauded as "the noblest nurseries of humanity and liberty in the kingdom" (qtd. in Sergeaunt 3), "offered a general and cultivated education to the Elizabethan gentleman as well as legal training" (Sturgess 9). The legally trained Ford was a truth-seeker, as can be seen in the subtitle of the play and in the Prologue, where he blames contemporary drama not so much for "want / Of art" as for "want of truth" (lines 5-6, 8. All quotations are from the Penguin edition of the play, edited by Keith Sturgess). In contrast, his play will be "a history couched in a play, / A history of noble mention, known, / Famous, and true: most noble, 'cause our own" (lines 14-16). With this ideal of truth before him, Ford seems to have done his research homework in order to rest the play upon a sound historical basis. Unlike his other plays, therefore, the problem of sources does not face one with many problems (Davril 179). It is generally agreed that his two main sources were Thomas Gainsford's *True and Wonderful History of Perkin Warbeck*, printed in 1618, and Francis Bacon's *The History of the Reign of King Henry VII*, published in 1622 (Struble 27; Ribner 299; Anderson xi; Ure xxv; Sturgess 395-96). It is significant that Ford singles out Bacon for special mention in the opening statement of the Dedicatory Epistle to the Earl of Newcastle, where he says that he was "enlightened by a late both learned and an honourable pen" (Ford 243). Since these words suggest a deeper indebtedness to Bacon, I argue in this paper that the uncertainty about the identity of Perkin Warbeck in the play had its origin in Bacon's account, a point that seems to have been overlooked in Ford scholarship.

In using his sources, Ford often follows them "closely" (Sturgess 396). Sometimes this reaches the point of versifying their prose. For example, the passage –

> How from our nursery we have been hurried
> Unto the sanctuary, from the sanctuary
> Forced to the prison, from the prison hal'd
> By cruel hands to the tormentor's fury. (2.1.49-52)

reads as follows in Bacon: "You see here before you the spectacle of a Plantagenet, who hath been carried from the nursery to the sanctuary;

from the sanctuary to the direful prison; from the prison to the hand of the cruel tormentor" (136-37). Ford sometimes borrows his imagery: "Margaret of Burgundy / Blows fresh coals of division" (1.1.43-44) comes from Gainsford's "In the meanwhile, the Firebrand and Fuel of this Contention, Lady Margaret, Duchess of Burgundy, had blown the Coals to such a Heat" (171). Indeed, in writing his history play, Ford seems to have had before him the histories of both Bacon and Gainsford. Verbal parallels show that he has borrowed from these histories about equally in act one, more from Gainsford in acts three and four, and more from Bacon in acts two and five (Anderson 1965, xi).

But, though described as "too conscientious and too impressionable a reader" (Wedgwood 93), Ford possesses the freedom of the artist. He has altered history to "create a viable dramatic structure and to pursue interests of his own" (Sturgess 396). Thus the two Scottish attacks on the north of England are made into one to avoid repetition (Oliver 102; Ure, xl). Similarly, at the end of the play, he brings Warbeck and King Henry face to face for the sake of contrast and dramatic effectiveness; in Bacon, "Perkin was brought into the king's court, but not to the king's presence" (169). It is also in the interests of artistic impact that the dramatist departs from his sources when he makes Lady Katherine "swear / To die a faithful widow" (5.3.151-52). In the sources of the play, Katherine married three more times (Sturgess 397; Hopkins 1994, 54). Sometimes, Ford departs from his sources for emphasis. For example, in order to create an idealized picture of King Henry, he makes him send his forces to Salisbury in anticipation of Warbeck's attack on Exeter, even before the latter's landing in Cornwall (Anderson 1965, xvi). In Bacon's and Gainsford's accounts, King Henry displays no such foresight in connection with Exeter. Another example is the introduction of Warbeck's followers into the story much earlier than Bacon and Gainsford do in their histories, apparently in order to make their leader's plans look foolish.

Ford's most radical departure from his sources, however, is that he does not make Perkin Warbeck confess being a counterfeit and impostor (Anderson 1965, xiv; Stavig 168; Hopkins 1994, 59). To account for this, Hopkins, "[s]etting Ford in the context of his relatives

and dedicatees" (i), proposes that "Ford actually believed Perkin Warbeck to have been the rightful Richard of York" (Hopkins 1994, 60). Although this proposal is "by no means an outrageous idea" (Hopkins 1994, 60), it seems untenable. It is significant that in her later book *Drama and the Succession to the Crown* Hopkins is not so sure. Referring the reader to that "possibility", she says that "Ford may perhaps have believed [Perkin Warbeck] to be inherently royal" (Hopkins 2011, 153). As Anderson has pointed out, Ford "could not suggest that Warbeck was in truth the son of Edward IV; if he did, he would, of course, be denying the legitimacy of the Tudor and Stuart monarchies" (Anderson 1960, 184). A simpler explanation of the absence of the confession in the play can be found in how that confession was obtained. According to Gainsford, Perkin was "put to the Rack, which made him not only confess his Pedigree and Original, but write it with his own Hands" (207). Bacon, a legal authority, ends his account with this paragraph:

> [Perkin] was diligently examined, and after his confession taken, an extract was made of such parts of them as were thought fit to be divulged, which was printed and dispersed abroad: wherein the king did himself no right; for as there was a laboured tale of particulars, of Perkin's father and mother, and grandsire and grandmother, and uncles and cousins, by names and surnames, and from what places he travelled up and down; so there was little or nothing to purpose of anything concerning his designs, or any practices that had been held with him; nor the duchess of Burgundy herself, that all the world did take knowledge of, as the person that had out life and being into the whole business, so much as named or pointed at. So that men, missing of that they looked for, looked about for they knew not what, and were in more doubt than before; but the King chose rather not to satisfy, than to kindle coals. At that time also, it did not appear by any new examinations or commitments, that any other person of quality was discovered or appeached, though the King's closeness made that a double dormant. (Bacon 170-71)

For a legally trained dramatist like Ford, the confession, taken on the rack and expurgated, would be inadmissible.

It is noteworthy that Bacon criticizes the King's handling of the confession. In fact, he is critical of the King's management of the whole affair of Perkin Warbeck, as can be seen in the first paragraph of his account:

> At this time the King began again to be haunted with spirits, by the magic and curious arts of the lady Margaret; who raised up the ghost of Richard duke of York, second son to King Edward the fourth, to walk and vex the King. This was a finer counterfeit stone than Lambert Simnel; better done, and worn upon greater hands; being graced after with the wearing of a King of France, and a King of Scotland, or of a duchess of Burgundy only. And for Simnel, there was not much in him, more than that he was a handsome boy, and did not shame his robes. But this youth, of whom we are to speak, was such a mercurial, as such the like hath seldom been known; and could make his own part, if at any time he chanced to be out. Wherefore this being one of the strangest examples of a personation, that ever was in elder or later times; it deserveth to be discovered, and related at the full. Although *the King's manner of showing things by pieces, and by dark lights, hath so muffled it, that it hath left it almost as a mystery to this day*. (104; emphasis added)

This is a key paragraph. First, it is the source of the opening lines of the play, spoken by King Henry: "Still to be haunted, still to be pursued, / Still to be frighted with false apparitions / Of pageant majesty and new coin'd greatness" (1.1.1-3). Secondly, it is the source of contrasting Lambert Simnel and Perkin Warbeck. Thirdly, and more importantly, it is the origin of the idea of uncertainty about the identity of Perkin Warbeck that Ford develops in the play.

That Ford has admirably succeeded in his deliberate creation of this uncertainty is well attested by scholars and critics. Peter Ure speaks of

"that flavour of ambiguity which is the persistent aftertaste of the play as a whole" (lxxix). A writer in the *TLS* uses the term "ambivalence" to refer to it ("Artifice or High Design" 434). According to Barish (1970), Ford "invites us throughout, and more strongly as the play nears its end, to entertain the hypothesis that Perkin may be telling the truth" (157). Farr concludes that "the story of Perkin Warbeck remains a mystery" (107), and Hopkins acknowledges that "the mystery of Perkin's identity" is left "unresolved" (Hopkins 1994, 41).

But one should turn to the play for proof. Perkin takes shape in one's mind as a counterfeit of royalty when one views him from the perspectives of King Henry and his counsellors. In the first act, for example, he is described as a "cub," a "gewgaw," a "smoke of straw," an "eager whelp," (1.1.104, 107, 115, 120); a "meteor," an "airy apparition" (1.3.35, 36); and one "fit to be a swabler / To the Flemish" (1.1.125-26). His followers (Frion, Heron, Skelton, Astley and John A-Water) also contribute to the creation of such an image. On the other hand, Ford highlights points that make one see Warbeck as a person truly born to wear a crown. The first point is his "noble language" (3.2.163). When presented to King James IV of Scotland, the King is so impressed by his eloquence that he declares:

> He must be more than subject who can utter
> The language of a king, and such is thine.
> Take this for answer: be whate'er thou art,
> Thou never shalt repent that thou hast put
> Thy cause and person into my protection. (2.1.103-06)

Secondly, there is the pure and unfaltering devotion of Lady Katherine Gordon, Perkin's wife. Ford departs from his sources to intensify this devotion, making her take an oath of life-long constancy in the final scene of the play: "By this sweet pledge of both our souls, I swear/ To die a faithful widow to thy bed; / Not to be forc'd or won. O, never, never!" (5.3.152-54). Thirdly, Perkin shows real concern for the English people when King James orders his army to "Forage through" the English countryside and "spare no prey of life or goods"(3.4.54-55). Here is his moving response:

> O, sir, then give me leave to yield to nature;

> I am most miserable. Had I been
> Born what this clergyman would by defame
> Baffle belief with, I had never sought
> The truth of my inheritance with rapes
> Of women, or of infants murdered, virgins
> Deflowered, old men butchered, dwellings fir'd,
> My land depopulated, and my people
> Afflicted with a kingdom's devastation.
> Show more remorse, great king, or I shall never
> Endure to see such havoc with dry eyes.
> Spare, spare my dear, dear England! (3.4.56-67)

Such response can only come from a true patriot. Perkin's nobility is also clear in the face-to-face meeting with King Henry in the fifth act: he requests mercy not for himself but for his supporters (5.2.90-99). Moreover, it is significant that Ford does not give Perkin any soliloquies or asides and that, when alone with Frion, his chief counsellor, he insists he is Richard:

> Let his [Henry's] mines,
> Shap'd in the bowels of the earth, blow up
> Works rais'd for my defence, yet can they never
> Toss into air the freedom of my birth,
> Or disavow my blood Plantagenet's.
> I am my father's son still . . . (4.2. 8-13)

Thus, the real state of his mind is not disclosed. Even when he is set in the stocks and is led off to execution, one cannot be quite sure about the truth or falsity of his claim.

It is noteworthy that there are as many as 25 references to "fate" in the play. This significant repetition suggests that Ford subscribed to the widely-held contemporary belief in predestination (Wedgwood 96). It also throws more light on his special attitude towards the identity of Perkin; for to believe in predestination is to believe that judgment rests with God, that the final evidence is comprehensible to Him alone.

Yet, whether Warbeck's claim is true or not, he, as Ford implies, must be politically sacrificed for the sake of stability in the state. For all

his attractive personal qualities, he is presented as an ineffectual and unpractical leader. What matters in the realities of politics, Ford points out, is not "divinty / Of royal birth" (4.5.56-57), on which Warbeck completely depends, but efficient statesmanship. It is King Henry who displays the characteristics of an able statesman. He is introduced as "the best physician" who has healed the wounds of England and restored peace after "ninety years" of "civil wars" (1.1.11, 16, 19). "He is wise as he is gentle" (1.3.17). In foreign affairs, he accepts the wise counsel of Hialas, the Spanish envoy. In war, he exhibits a balance of justice, mercy, and reward for loyalty. When the Cornish rebellion is crushed, he points out that it is "no victory, nor shall people / Conceive that we can triumph in their falls" (3.1.80-81). Therefore, he punishes only the leaders of the revolt: "Examples to the rest, whom we are pleas'd / To pardon and dismiss from further quest" (3.1.101-02). Moreover, he does not forget his soldiers. When Daubeney reminds him of their loyal service against the Scots, he replies:

> For it we will throw
> A largesse free amongst them, which shall hearten
> And cherish up their loyalties. More yet
> Remains of like employment; not a man
> Can be dismiss'd till enemies abroad,
> More dangerous than these at home, have felt
> The puissance or our arms. O, happy kings
> Whose thrones are raised in their subjects' hearts. (3.1.112-19)

In internal affairs, King Henry is thrifty, taking care that the money of his people will never be "scattered/ On cobweb parasites," "undeserving" favourites, "riot," or "a needless hospitality" (4.4.47-51). Moreover, he is shown (as in the case of Stanley) to be ready to listen to his ministers and to accept their advice, though against his inclinations (2.2). This indicates that he does recognize responsibility before his people. According to Hopkins, the moral of the play is: "be a good king, and involve your nobility fully in the process of ruling" (Hopkins 1994, 59).

Thus, Ford succeeds in airing, though by implication, his own political views and, at the same time, creating in the minds of his

readers uncertainty about the identity of Perkin Warbeck, leaving it, in Bacon's words, "almost as a mystery" (104).

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