

A Welsh Poem of 1485 on Richard III

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Everyone knows Wales is a land rich in bards. Unfortunately, for most of us outside Wales their poetry is unknown and mysterious as that of China. So it is no surprise if a Welsh poem on Richard III's death should be unfamiliar to historians, despite a translation into English by Dr Brynley Roberts of Aberystwyth.¹ There is hence room for a discussion of these verses that treats them in the same way as other historical sources. They will thereby tell us what was in the minds of those who, one morning in the late summer of 1485, woke up to hear of Henry Tudor's victory at Bosworth.

The lines on Richard are the work of the bard and prognosticator Dafydd Llwyd, who has gone down in tradition as the bard consulted by Henry Tudor on his way to Bosworth. What follows, besides giving a new text of the poem in English and relating it to the events of the period, also says something on its author. The result, a sample from the mass of commentary on English politics in fifteenth-century Welsh poetry (little of it critically edited, and even less translated), provides insight on Richard's reputation immediately after his death. It should thus interest all historians of the last Yorkist monarch. It gives us an idea of what a contemporary thought of five kings: Henry VI, Edward IV, Edward V, Richard III, and Henry VII. As expected, most of these emerge as angel, hero, or devil. But the poem is also remarkable for what it does not say. As with political commentaries past and present, the poet's silences (on Edward IV's crimes, or Richard's alleged deformities, or the identities of his English victims, or on what actually happened at Bosworth, which is not named) are revealing. This tells us something about Dafydd Llwyd's ignorance or discretion, or even his mere indifference.

The poem appears in *Gwaith Dafydd Llwyd o Fathafarn*, the standard edition of Dafydd Llwyd's poetry, edited by W. Leslie Richards and published by the University of Wales Press in 1964. The verses, beginning *Mae'r goron ym mrig eryr*, are headed *Cynydd i'r Brenin Richard a Ddistrywiodd ei Ddau Nai, Meibion Brenin Edward* 'A cywydd [a kind of Welsh poem in rhyming couplets] to King Richard, who destroyed his two nephews, sons of King Edward'.² The following translation of it is by the present writer, who uses round brackets to show digressions by the poet and square brackets to show additions by the translator.

The crown is on the eagle's [Henry's] brow,
If it is true the mole [Richard] and his men are slain.
King Henry comes as conqueror
(Crown of gold) and is our beloved.
Yonder are bards made glad,
The world flourishing and little R slaughtered:
Pallid, cruel letter,
Forked, despised in England.
R in place of I could not
Rule England or move it.
He would not go, he would not report the part,
In the breach where Edward would go.
Hateful is it to see, evil shepherd,
A pale leg where was a mighty thigh,
Seeking the horns, fine, vigorous, swift,
The cloister's lost word, losing the ears.
A Jew it was that was put an end to,
Britain's horn, grey London's fortress;
A fettered boar who in his ward
Punished sons of Edward.
If he slew, without judge's leave,
His two youthful nephews,
I should think it strange (some type of anger)

¹ Brynley F. Roberts, 'Ode to King Richard', in Pamela Tudor-Craig, *Richard III*, 2nd edn, London 1977, p. 95.

² *Gwaith Dafydd Llwyd o Fathafarn*, ed W. Leslie Richards, Caerdydd 1964, p. 69.

Of God that earth did not swallow him up.
 Shame upon the wretched Saracen
 For killing angels, Christ's own.
 An atrocity he did, by St Non's miracles,
 An exploit of cruel Herod.
 God from heaven, our creator,
 Was angered when Henry [VI] was killed.
 If he killed the saint
 On Thursday night, he sentenced himself to death.
 The little boar is no more,
 There was not killed one who more deserved it.
 He formed monstrous deceit,
 Behold his deceit in his brow.
 If Richard, like a Saracen,
 Carried out this dire killing,
 In time God above sends
 The vengeance where it is due.
 God's vengeance and its semblance
 Will come heavily to an evil man.
 The little caterpillar of London
 Was to be curled up in a knot of thorns.
 He broke, from evil nature,
 Heads of earls; who did worse?
 Heads of the chiefest lords,
 A duke's head for no good reason.
 For a long while there was need
 For vengeance of the grasshopper [Henry Tudor] for this.
 It was my wish, he was slain,
 That God slew him and prevailed over him.
 The hound slaughtered in the ditch,
 Success to whoever killed him.
 Evil he did that remains a fault
 Yonder, and another evil remains.
 By trying to climb through need,
 The old cock [Henry Tudor] brought down the dwelling;
 A fall for which I care little,
 Like the fall of Simon Magus.
 True misery it was to crown
 A little ape [Richard] with a magpie's leash.
 A curse on the twisted crown upon him,
 An ill sorrow met yonder.
 Wonder was it that his possessing might be,
 The Englishman's gift after sainted Henry;
 The saint under a crown
 Who left none that did not love him.
 Henry was, Henry may be,
 Henry is, long life to him!

Naturally, the poem says little on the events of Richard's reign and we should not expect this. Welsh bards from the earliest times functioned as propagandists and prophets rather than as chroniclers. But the poem is of significance in showing how the blackening of Richard's name had begun within a few days of his death. If the second line 'If it is true the mole and his men are slain' can be taken literally, Dafydd was writing when reports of Henry's victory were unconfirmed. Let us look at the poem in detail.

It begins with code-words of Dafydd and his fellow-poets. *Gwadd* 'mole' (like *baedd* 'boar') is their term for Richard; *eyr* 'eagle' for Henry Tudor. Dafydd's *I* in line nine, taken as the English pronunciation of *E* 'Edward', probably refers to Edward IV (rather than Edward V). *Collair* in line 16 is an obscure and difficult form and puzzled scribes, as its variants show. 'Lost word' is a mere literal translation. *Iddew* 'Jew' in line 17, and *Sarasin* 'Saracen' in lines 25 and 37, are standard medieval terms of abuse. St Non (line 27), who lived in

the sixth century, was the mother of St David. Since we hear little of her miracles (except when she gave birth to David), her name perhaps occurs here mainly for the sake of rhyme. *Y Sant* 'the saint' in line 32 is Henry VI (1421-71). The (erroneous) reference to his death on a Thursday night is discussed below. In line 44 the form *lindys* means 'caterpillar', and Brynley Roberts is surely right to take this as it stands, and not as a corruption of *lynx* 'lynx, (as Leslie Richards imagined). The allusion to the earls and others that Richard destroyed is to William Hastings, baron Hastings; Anthony Woodville, second earl of Rivers; Lord Richard Grey; and Henry Stafford, second duke of Buckingham. All four perished in 1483. Simon Magus of line 60 is the (converted) necromancer of Acts 8:18-19, who tried to gain spiritual gifts from the apostles by offering them money.

Welsh scholars have discussed the poem over the years. Evans usefully pointed out that the eagle, grasshopper, and old cock are Henry Tudor; the saint is Henry VI; and the boar, mole, 'little R', Jew, Saracen, dog, and ape are Richard III.³ Such allusions are typical of Welsh prophetic verse, giving it an oracular obscurity for modern readers (and perhaps early ones too). In 1979 Evans repeated his comments in English more than forty years after making them in Welsh, his concern throughout being the Welsh bard and his language rather than Richard. His text of the poem differs in important details from that of Leslie Richards, whose critical edition he (unwisely) did not quote in his later essay.⁴

In an acute survey of Dafydd's life and work, Enid Roberts of Bangor briefly mentioned this poem, referring to the universal joy of the bards on Henry Tudor's victory. For Dafydd, Richard's death at Bosworth is God's judgement on his wickedness. In other poems Dafydd ascribes Henry's victory to the intercession of St David.⁵ The poem is also cited in a survey of fifteenth-century bards by E.D. Jones, formerly of the National Library of Wales. He referred to the belief in it that Richard murdered Henry VI immediately after Edward IV entered London from his victory at Tewkesbury. That was the night of Tuesday, 21 May 1471. Why then did Dafydd say it occurred on Thursday? Jones thought Dafydd did not know the facts but perhaps linked it with Ascension Day, which in 1471 fell on 23 May. He also noted what he took as an allusion to Richard's deformed body ('The little caterpillar of London / Was to be curled up in a knot of thorns'), and to the political executions of Richard's reign; and read line 62 as *Gwrah bach â garrai pi* (followed in the above translation), not Leslie Richards's *Gwrah bach a garai pi* 'A little ape that a magpie loved'.⁶ Glanmor Williams of Swansea mentioned Dafydd's delight in Richard's death and his exultation in Henry Tudor's triumph.⁷

Yet there is still room for an analysis of the text as regards historical tradition and Tudor propaganda, of which Dafydd's poem is probably the first instance of Henry VII's reign. Five points can be made. They concern the murder of Henry VI; the princes in the Tower; Richard's executions; his alleged deformity; and the depiction of Henry VI as a saint.

First, the death of Henry VI in the Tower on the night of 21 May 1471. Dafydd is cautious in his statements. He thinks that Henry was murdered and that Richard's death was divine punishment for the deed. But he is careful not to state that Richard was the murderer, though he thinks it possible. 'God from heaven, our creator, / Was angered when Henry was killed. / If he [Richard] killed the saint / On Thursday night, he sentenced himself to death'. 'If Richard, like a Saracen, / Carried out this dire killing, / In time God above sends / The vengeance where it is due'. This circumspection is striking. Tudor propaganda was to add Henry's death to Richard's 'crimes' and Dafydd shows this process had already begun. His comments may be contrasted with those of modern historians, who speak of no more than an 'element of suspicion' connecting Richard with Henry's death, and observing that at worst he was merely an agent, not the instigator, since the decision to kill Henry would be made by Edward IV alone (whom Dafydd refrains from criticizing).⁸

Next, the princes. Here Dafydd is less constrained. He calls Richard, 'A fettered boar who in his ward / Punished sons of Edward. / If he slew, without judge's leave, / His two youthful nephews, / I should think it strange (some type of anger) / Of God that earth did not swallow him up. / Shame upon the wretched Saracen / For killing angels, Christ's own. / An atrocity he did, by St Non's miracles, / An exploit of cruel Herod'. For Dafydd the death of the princes is an unnatural crime. As with the massacres of Christians by Moors, or Herod's slaughter of the Innocents, those murdered are guiltless. Yet even here Dafydd retains the

³ R. Wallis Evans, 'Trem ar y Cywydd Brud', in *Harlech Studies*, ed Ben Bowen Thomas, Cardiff 1938, pp. 149-63.

⁴ R. Wallis Evans, 'Prophetic poetry', in *A Guide to Welsh Literature*, ed Alfred Owen Hughes Jarman and Gwilym Rees Hughes, Swansea 1976-, vol. 2, pp. 278-297.

⁵ Enid Roberts, *Dafydd Llwyd o Fathafarn, sine loco* 1981, p. 33.

⁶ Evan D. Jones, *Beirdd y Bymthegfed Ganrif a'u Cefndir*, Aberystwyth 1982, pp. 56-57.

⁷ Glanmor Williams, *Recovery, Reorientation and Reformation: Wales c. 1415-1642*, Oxford 1987, pp. 226-27.

⁸ Charles Ross, *Richard III*, London 1981, p. 22.

word 'if' for the unlawful killing of Edward V and his brother, though leaving us in little doubt on what he thinks the truth.

Dafydd's remarks of 1485 had been anticipated by others. The Crowland chronicler, Dominic Mancini, contemporary London chronicles, and Guillaume de Rochefort in an outburst of January 1484, together had no doubt that the princes died in 1483 and that Richard was responsible. It is remarkable that Dafydd leaves an element of uncertainty as late as the summer of 1485. Also striking is his comparison of the boys to angels or innocents. He had the same thought as the compiler of the *Great Chronicle* for the portion ending in 1496, who included the marginal notes 'Innocents' and 'Death of the Innocents' on the disappearance of Edward's sons.⁹

Dafydd is more perfunctory on other political murders of Richard's reign, saying merely 'He broke, from evil nature, / Heads of earls; who did worse? / Heads of the chiefest lords, / A duke's head for no good reason?'. He does not trouble to name Richard's victims. His allusion to the death of the duke of Buckingham in 1483 (it is hardly to Clarence's execution in 1478) is significantly cool. Buckingham was a great Marcher lord, administering his Welsh domains from Brecon. Yet he was a hard and much-hated man. Morale amongst the Welsh tenants forced to join his rebellion was low. They soon deserted him. Amongst the ninety-seven supporters of Buckingham later attainted, there was not one Welshman.¹⁰ No surprise, then, that a Welsh patriot like Dafydd Llwyd wastes little sympathy on Buckingham or on Richard's other victims from the English nobility.

However, despite the comments of E.D. Jones, the poem does not allude to Richard's mythical physical deformity. Nor should it. It is true that contemporary authorities agree Richard was short, unlike Edward IV, tallest of English kings. Dafydd's phrases 'little R', 'little ape', and 'little caterpillar of London' point to Richard's diminutive stature, just as Dafydd's reference to Edward's 'mighty thigh' shows he knew that king was physically impressive (always an asset for monarchs). But even the hostile John Rous, who maintained that Richard was born with hair down to his shoulders and with teeth, said nothing on his being a hunchback. The first claim that he was comes from a York city record of 1491. In a row with a local schoolmaster, one John Payntour allegedly said Richard was a 'hypocrite, a crookback, and buried in a ditch like a dog'. (The last remark strangely echoes Dafydd's 'The hound slaughtered in the ditch'.) It was Thomas More who spread the potent myth of Richard 'Crookback'.¹¹ Yet there is none of that in Dafydd's poem.

More positively, Dafydd's poem is evidence for the cult of Henry VI. This had begun as early as 1472, when loyal Lancastrians established shrines to Henry at Durham, Ripon, and elsewhere. In a letter of 27 October 1479, Archbishop Booth had condemned the decoration with flowers and other gifts of a statue of Henry at York Minster. Meanwhile, Henry's tomb at Chertsey in Surrey was attracting pilgrims and producing rumours of miracles. This popular veneration (with obvious political implications) increased during Richard's reign. Further alleged miracles at Chertsey led Richard to translate Henry's body to St George's Chapel at Windsor in August 1484. If he hoped this would stifle criticism, he failed. Pilgrims thronged to Windsor; Henry's cap and spurs were revered as relics; stories of miracles multiplied. The cult of the last Lancastrian proved a forceful weapon against the last Yorkist, not least because Henry VI was said to have marked out Henry Tudor as his heir.¹² (The editor of *The Ricardian* has observed to the writer that additional money from pilgrims to Henry VI's tomb for the benefit of Windsor would have been in Richard's mind as the chapel was being finished.) So Dafydd's allusions to the royal saint fall into place with the images, manuscript miniatures, hymns, and other fifteenth-century aspects of the cult of Henry VI.

The above does not exhaust the historical materials provided by Dafydd's poem. Its repeated emphasis on the crown is curious. We know Richard wore his crown on the battlefield and that it was later found there (perhaps on that celebrated thornbush) and placed on the victor's head. Dafydd's allusions to it may reflect accounts of this. The confusion of the battle is perhaps also shown in how little Dafydd says of it: no account of the fighting, no list of victims; even its whereabouts is not mentioned. Dafydd's remarks on the political success of Edward IV, as opposed to Richard's failure to gain support, are also noteworthy. One might add that Dafydd's abuse of Richard as undersized or as ape, caterpillar, Jew, Saracen, Herod, or as like Simon Magus is part of the campaign of vilification of Richard that reaches its high point with Shakespeare.¹³ It

⁹ Ross, *Richard III*, p. 100.

¹⁰ Williams, *Recovery*, p. 214.

¹¹ Ross, *Richard III*, pp. 139-40.

¹² John W. McKenna, 'Piety and propaganda: The cult of King Henry VI', in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed Beryl Rowland, Kent, Ohio, 1974, pp. 72-88; Ross, *Richard III*, p. 136.

¹³ Ross, *Richard III*, p. xx.

accords with Dafydd's view of Richard's violent death as showing divine vengeance in action, an archaic and scriptural interpretation of history (that one reaps what one sows) that finds eloquent expression in Shakespeare.

In short, Dafydd's poem reveals a surprising amount on what was thought and felt as the news of Bosworth spread through the land in the last days of August, 1485. Given what can be extracted from this single poem, one wonders at the wealth of historical data awaiting proper discussion in other Welsh poems of the period.¹⁴

Let us close by turning from poem to poet. Dafydd Llwyd, who died (at an immense age) about 1500, was a gentleman of Mathafarn (SH 8004), some five miles east of Machynlleth, Powys. He was famous in his day and later for his verse prophecies, and wrote himself into the history of England by the tradition that Henry Tudor, on his march from Milford Haven to Bosworth, consulted him on the outcome. This story is a favourite of guide books and serious historians alike.¹⁵ Since it usually appears in abbreviated form, it is worth repeating the tale of Henry and Dafydd Llwyd as it first appeared in print.

The earl [sic] of Richmond, on his way from Milford towards Shrewsbury, to contest for the crown which was tottering on Richard III's head, thought it worth his while to call at Mathavarn, and consult this pupil of Merddin as to the success of his adventure, and at once proposed the question to his seer. The answer was not ready; he hesitated, and promised a reply by the following morning. Finding his craft failing him, he grew visibly dejected. His wife having observed such a sudden change in her husband's countenance inquired, after the earl had retired to rest, the reason. He told her the dilemma he was in; upon which she exclaimed:— 'What! you a bard,— a prophet, — a sage! Can *you* hesitate what answer to return to the question? Tell him confidently that he *will* succeed to the throne; and if that proves true, your character is established: if not, you need not fear that he will return here to reproach you for being a false prophet'. This satisfied the seer; and no less so the earl, when they held a consultation at the dawn of the following morning. This adventure gave rise to the proverb, (still recollected by the peasantry), *Cynghor gwraig heb ei olyn*, that is, 'A wife's advice, without being asked for it', is always auspicious.¹⁶

This memorable anecdote was soon repeated.¹⁷ Despite its air of *ben trovato* it may even rest upon fact. True, the story is unknown before the nineteenth-century edition of Dafydd's fellow-poet Lewis Glyn Cothi. It is also true that Dafydd had no (legal) wife, having long been a widower; and it would be a poor bard and vaticinator that needed his wife's counsel on such matters. Yet Enid Roberts thought there was reason to think Henry Tudor spent the night of 11 August 1485 at Mathafarn and there consulted Dafydd Llwyd.¹⁸ If so, the warmth of Dafydd's feeling in his poem on Richard and Henry, written some two or three weeks later, would be in no way unremarkable.

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¹⁴ Cf. Howell T. Evans, *Wales and the Wars of the Roses*, Cambridge 1915, pp. 226-28; Andrew Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Poetry*, Dublin 1997, pp. 146-47.

¹⁵ *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, London 1959, p. 102; Elisabeth Beazley and Peter Howell, *The Companion Guide to North Wales*, London 1975, pp. 298-9; Williams, *Recovery*, p. 221.

¹⁶ *The Poetical Works of Lewis Glyn Cothi*, Oxford 1837-39, p. 449.

¹⁷ Samuel Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Wales*, 2 vols, 3rd edn, London 1844, vol. 2, p. 165.

¹⁸ William Rees, *An Historical Atlas of Wales*, London 1951, plate 54; Roberts, *Dafydd Llwyd*, pp. 5-6.