Arthurian Myths and Alchemy: the Kingship of Edward IV

Review Number: 335
Publish date: Sunday, 1 June, 2003
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ISBN: 750919949X
Date of Publication: 2002
Price: £30.00
Pages: 354pp.
Publisher: Sutton Publishing
Place of Publication: Stroud
Reviewer: Lesley Coote

The reign of Edward IV, as Jonathan Hughes points out, is unique in English history; it was the first – and last – time a king of England lost his throne, went into exile, invaded his own kingdom and regained his crown, enabling him to destroy his rivals and to reign in relative peace and tranquillity for another thirteen years. The extraordinary nature of these years (1461-1483) is made even more extraordinary by Hughes's researches, which reveal a 'hidden' world of alchemists, relatives and 'personal advisers' helping to direct Edward's policies, propaganda and indeed, his own self-image. Of course, Edward's reign is also interesting in terms of its structure, as it appears to divide neatly into two distinct halves (1461-9 and 1471-83), with a short period of exile in Burgundy at its centre.

Hughes argues that the different requirements of each 'phase' of Edward of York's life and the challenges he faced are characterised by the development and use of different forms of royal propaganda and self-representation. At the outset, Edward's 'image' was founded upon Arthurian themes, and the alchemical interests of those who surrounded him and acted as his advisers, such as the Augustinian canon of Bridlington, George Ripley. The justification for Edward's seizure of the throne from Henry VI was also based upon his British ancestry, with specially-produced genealogies, accompanied by prophecies and other historiographical material proclaiming him to be the 'second Arthur', who would unite the kingdoms of Britain, thus fulfilling the prophecy made by the Angelic Voice to Cadwallader, last king of the Britons, at the end of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie*.

Once king, Edward IV drifted away from his original purpose into lassitude and avarice, causing him to be abandoned by many who had previously viewed him as the well-balanced man who could heal the nation's body. During the period of exile and conflict at the centre of his reign, Edward regained his bodily equilibrium and his kingdom, returning to the Galfridian propaganda and imagery that had characterised his assumption of power in 1461. In the second period of his reign, Edward and his advisers inclined more towards the Roman, imperial models of rule favoured in the past by Henry V. This period witnessed the translation of many works of Roman history, philosophy and statecraft into English. However, the Treaty of Picquigny in 1475 signalled a downturn in Edward's health and attitudes, in particular a disastrous reliance on the pension given by Louis XI as a result of the treaty. This caused the kingdom to slide once again into the Arthurian 'wasteland' of political uncertainty and turmoil, culminating in the usurpation of the throne and murder of Edward V by Richard, duke of Gloucester. Hughes gives 1475 as a watershed for Richard,

after which he abandoned his unquestioning loyalty to his brother; in the following years, the seeds of the events of 1483 were sown.(1) Alchemists such as Ripley switched their allegiances to Henry Tudor, refusing (when they were aware of the deaths of Edward V and his brother) to accept the Saturnine influences of Richard; the imagery of the marriage between the red rose and the white, culminating in the red and white Tudor rose, owes much to their influence.

Hughes reveals the alchemical influences that shaped much of Edward's propaganda at its point of origin. Symbols such as the 'sun in splendour' and the 'three crowns', by which Edward was known, had alchemical meanings, however else they came to be perceived by contemporaries. This raises questions about how such symbols were perceived by different sections of the community – they could be heraldic, natural, alchemical, astrological, mythological or simply be associated culturally with ideas such as 'the sun of majesty' (as with Richard II in Clement Maidstone's account of Richard's reception in London in 1392). (2) Few people, as Sydney Anglo has pointed out, ever saw the king; but they 'saw' him in the symbols by which he was represented.(3) The 'perception history' of such symbols is clearly important not only for this period, but for other reigns, and the alchemical origins and understanding of some of them has implications for the study of prophecy. Whilst it is not true that all images used in prophecy had their origins in alchemy, this set of meanings needs to be examined, and some prophecies, such as *Adam Davy's Dreams about Edward II*, most certainly offer themselves for this type of explanation.(4)

Also evident from Hughes's account is the sheer amount of propaganda that accompanied Edward of York's seizure of the English throne (that is, during the early 1460s). The many examples he gives (and he does not claim to be fully comprehensive) reveal the extent to which this propaganda, including its associated imagery, penetrated all areas of England, both geographically and culturally. This type of material had been used before, but not in such proportions – it might almost be said that Edward's supporters *saturated* England with his royal claims. This has important implications for the organs of propaganda in fifteenth-century England. Were these created by Edward, or were they already in place? The speed with which material was disseminated suggests the latter, but if so, why was such saturation not in evidence before the 1460s? Edward IV's government seems to have been able to destroy and replace the 'person' of Henry VI with some measure of efficiency.(Hughes, p. 231) What were the spiritual and secular instruments for this, who were the personnel, and how did they operate locally?

The second aspect highlighted by Hughes – and this is the book's greatest strength (indeed, its centre) – is Edward IV's own interest in alchemy, his close relationship with George Ripley and others with similar interests, and the influences which this had upon Edward's own ideology and self-belief. Also really interesting is the connection between Ripley, Thomas Norton (alchemist and 'prophet') and George Neville, archbishop of York. Hughes's knowledge of the nature of fifteenth-century alchemy enables him to offer interesting new perspectives on the motivations of this group, and the fluctuating nature of their relationship with their royal patron. Particularly striking is the revelation that to men such as Ripley, the rise and fall of kings was seen in the nature of an alchemical experiment.(5) Hughes also relates some stories which, although they carry political resonance, are simply delightful in themselves, such as the story of Thomas Dalton, who threw his supply of 'red medicine' down the privy in order to keep the means of manufacturing gold – and doubtless his own person – away from King Edward.(pp. 199-200)

The person of George Ripley himself stands out from the pages like a fifteenth-century Merlin, a role in which he obviously perceived himself. Ripley enters the story as one of the alchemists concerned with the continued illness of Henry VI. He 'supervises' (or, perhaps, rationalises) the meteoric rise of Edward IV, abandons him in 1469, then rationalises the king's renewal in 1471. He then admonishes Edward for turning away from his former, life-giving principles after 1475, opposes Richard III, and provides the justification and alchemical imagery that accompany the accession of Henry VII. Like the original Merlin in relation to Vortigern, to Uther Pendragon and to Arthur, he frequently appears much more fascinating than the king himself, and it is something of a pity that he is not even more prominent in the book.(6)

The presence of Ripley and his fellow alchemists, and their connection with senior churchmen such as

George Neville opens up the possibility that such networks, peripheral and yet connected to the royal circle, were not necessarily new. Hilary Carey has noted the presence of astrologers on the periphery of earlier medieval courts, and J. H. Wylie relates the story of how Stephen Courtenay introduced Henry V, on the way to the Agincourt campaign, to the astrologer/experimental philosopher Jean Fusoris. Courtenay had consulted Fusoris in Paris concerning the future success of the campaign, and of Henry's proposed marriage with Catherine of Valois. Fusoris gave Henry some books and an astrolabe, and was rewarded with thanks and a gift of forty gold nobles by Henry and Courtenay.(7) Courtenay was a close friend of Henry, and bishop of Norwich; he appears in this case to be acting as a 'go-between', as George Neville appears to have done.

Was a similar group of men active in and around the court of Henry V, and did they exercise a similar influence upon his self-representation? Were they related, or connected, to the men who advised the councillors of Henry VI on his illness, and who subsequently advised Edward IV? Perhaps Edward inherited more than an interest in the Roman past from Henry V. This must surely, now, be considered a possibility.(8) Hughes notes the importance of the king's health – or lack of it – during Henry VI's maturity, and describes a meeting of 'alchemists' in 1456 at which the consequences of this for the kingdom were discussed, and a solution sought. What is surprising and important, is that the alchemical multiplication of coin by turning base metals into gold was seriously considered as a means of remedying the chronic financial situation, and that an increasingly metaphysical, mythological view was being applied to politics.(9) It may be that, after the victories of Henry V (or maybe even those of Edward III), the English were 'living the myth' – hence its effectiveness as propaganda.

Ripley, of course, was not the first Yorkshire Augustinian to be interested in prophecy and experimental science. Hughes mentions John Erghome, canon and regent master at York during the second half of the fourteenth century.(p. 147: see also note (10)) Ripley and Erghome are connected by Erghome's books. At some point, Erghome bequeathed his library to the Augustinian canons of York. The catalogue of this library is still extant, with Erghome's books listed separately. This includes, in a section entitled '*prophecie et supersticiosa*', many works of astrology and astronomy, mathematics, tables and *calendaria*, with works of prophecy, geomancy, the properties of minerals and 'natural philosophy'.(11) It cannot be doubted that these books would have been used by the young Ripley, a member of the same order living about a day's journey down the road in Bridlington.

One of the works listed is *excerpiones prophetie Fr. Johannis de rupescissa*. Ripley's knowledge of this provides a connection – albeit tangential – with the east window at Tattershall. (Hughes, p. 42) *Rupescissa* states that the great apocalyptic king who will reconquer the Holy Land and rule the world in the Last Days (by Edward IV' s time also associated with the second Arthur, and therefore a present or future king of England) will be aided by an Angelic Pope.(12) The central panels of the Tattershall window depict a king and a pope, identified by the surrounding images as Edward IV and Pope Pius II. This does not depict a historical, but a prophetic event; a meeting of the Great King and the Angelic Pope, surrounded by heraldic/alchemical images as described by Hughes in his book. The image is both a prophecy (for those who understand it), and a religious icon (for those who don't). It represents what Hughes has outlined as a feature of Edward IV's propaganda; it not only bends the religious into the service of the state, but secularizes religion itself.(13)

The revival of Arthurian associations and Galfridian prophecy did not, of course, begin with Edward IV. This was a feature of the reign of Henry VI, largely due to what was perhaps the greatest legacy of Henry V to the rest of the century, Edward IV included – the prophetic resonance of his success in France, and the 'accident' of Henry VI's birthplace.(14) Henry was born at Windsor, the birthplace of Edward III, the 'boar of Windsor' in the prophecies, and the king, according to the Bridlington verses, whose sinless successor would be the great, apocalyptic, crusading 'second Arthur'. Henry V's infant son was expected to fulfil this prophetic destiny. Henry's government used genealogies with claims to British ancestry as propaganda, and there is an upsurge in the number of Galfridian prophecies in the early part of Henry's reign. The first English translation of the French Arthurian cycle was made by Henry Lovelich in the reign of Henry VI.(15)

The Fisher King was healed by divine intervention. Hughes says that Ripley originally hoped that Henry VI would be reborn and renewed (as, indeed, Edward IV was – spectacularly – in 1471). This is true also of John Hardyng, another of the examples given in the book, and is supported by the evidence of political prophecies from the 1450s.(16) A belief in Arthurian myth would lead the majority of the aristocracy, at least, to support Henry rather than York's son.(17) This is precisely why the great propaganda effort of 1461, described by Hughes in diligently-researched detail, was necessary. If a 'young man' were to heal the nation, it was expected to be Edward of Westminster - born 'miraculously' in 1453, after eight years of marriage, when his father was mentally ill – not Edward of York. This young man's death at Tewkesbury in 1471 was crucially important. The line of Henry V had been extinguished, enabling the house of York to take up the 'Roman legacy' of Henry V (as Hughes notes), and establishing the peace that enabled this to happen. Edward IV did, indeed, portray himself as 'the second Arthur', and his family members (and those of the families with which he was associated) did have links with romance legends, some of them Arthurian. They did possess books of Arthurian romance, and attempted to conform to the same chivalric way of life as indicated in Arthurian, and other romance, literature. However, this is simply to say that they were fifteenth-century aristocrats; Edward of York and his family were no different in this respect from other great families of their day. The difference lies in the British ancestry of the Mortimer family, which Hughes describes in detail. In their case, unlike that of the house of Lancaster, the Welsh ancestry was 'genuine'.

Hughes's book is very well researched, very well written, and extremely readable. It opens up a very different view of the person, and the reign, of Edward IV. As is hopefully apparent from this survey, it presents many new ideas for further research in fifteenth-century studies. The appendices are extremely useful, in particular the list of manuscripts and the section on alchemical texts. Although the descriptions of the manuscripts are terse, this is a very useful research tool. The 'sample genealogy' given in Appendix III is interesting, and is designed to be explanatory for the reader. Overall, this book forms an essential addition to existing work on the life and times of Edward IV.(18)

There are only two real problems, both concerned with referencing. First, secondary sources are not always cited where the seriously committed reader needs them. For example, the passages on Henry V's adoption of Roman models and Lydgate's Troy Book, the use of Hardyng's *Chronicle* in 'The Legacy of Henry VI', and the assessment of Malory's *Morte Darthur* are accompanied by few, or no, references to secondary sources.(pp. 25-31 (Lydgate); pp. 48, 72, 168 (Hardyng); pp. 205-10 (Malory)). These are the places at which the reader really wants to know what the writer has been reading. Relevant literature is cited in the bibliography, but the connection between this and the main text is frequently not made. This may be a publishing, rather than an authorial, decision; but if this information is not given, how is the reader to 'follow up'? Manuscript references are of no use to the general reader, who does not ordinarily have access to manuscript collections.

The second problem is the giving of 'new' names to manuscripts, or collections of manuscripts. *The Prophetic History of Britain* is actually two manuscripts, each of which contains an anthology of prophecies in a political context.(19) The two manuscripts are not, however, the same in either contents or in appearance, nor do they contain chronicles, or 'histories'. This is confusing, in that the reader must continually check the endnotes in order to see which manuscript is meant, and the name conveys the impression that this is a single 'work', which it clearly is not. The name also conveys a message about the nature of the material in these manuscripts (that this is a 'prophetic *history*') which does not truly reflect the contents. It may be that this has been done to make them more memorable for a general audience, but it may in fact cause the general reader confusion, and lead to wrong assumptions being made about the nature of the manuscript. Shelfmarks may convey an impression of 'scholarly stuffiness', but they are neutral, and still the best way of referring to manuscript sources and anonymous texts without compromising the contents.

Jonathan Hughes describes Edward IV as an 'intelligent, charismatic, fascinating but deeply flawed man'.(p. 20) The book proves the thesis. The main impression given is of Edward, with his interest in alchemy, his craft, his love of display, his valour and military ability, his opportunism, and on occasion his cruelty and unfairness, his avarice, his lasciviousness and his other vices, as a Renaissance prince, to be compared with

the princes of Italy – the Medici, the Sforza, the Borgias – rather than with his Plantagenet forebears, or even the kings of France. As a usurper and an adventurer, Edward needed to employ similar methods.(20) Hughes's work reveals a king who was never really secure on his throne, except perhaps in the years immediately after the death of Henry VI and his son; his 'Roman' years. Yet Edward never lost his sense of self-belief, until perhaps the last years of his reign.

In his summing-up of Edward and his legacy, Jonathan Hughes says that he was 'the first English king to harness the combined influences of alchemical medicine, myths and prophecies to weld together a nation'. Later, he says that Edward laid the foundations for the nation-state of the Tudors. This pinpoints two sides of the same equation. Edward IV took the myths, the prophecies, the alchemical medicine (and even religion itself) and used them in the service of the centralized state that he and his advisers created out of the aftermath of a bitter civil war. What Hughes is describing is the arrival of the Renaissance ruler, and the Renaissance nation-state, over half a century before Thomas Cromwell. As far as England is concerned, the 'medieval' ended in 1461.

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Notes

1. For a more detailed assessment of this, see L. Coote and T. Thornton, 'Richard, son of Richard: Richard III and political prophecy', *Historical Research*, 73 (2000), 321-30.Back to (1)
2. T. Wright, ed., *Political Poems and Songs relating to English History*, Rolls Series 14 (2 vols, Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts; London, 1859-61),1, pp. 282-99.Back to (2)
3. S. Anglo, 'British history and early Tudor propaganda', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 44 (1961), 17-48.Back to (3)
4. F. J. Furnivall, ed, *Adam Davy's Dreams about Edward the Second*, EETS OS 69 (N. Trübner and Co.; London, 1878). The first dream takes place in front of the altar in Westminster Abbey. Edward, standing on the Cosmati pavement installed by his grandfather, receives blows from two knights, from which he receives no hurt. The knights withdraw, and red and white light issues from Edward's ears, reaching out across his kingdom. The author is probably a cleric writing under an assumed name – does this represent an alchemical attempt to influence the new king? See L. Coote, *Prophecy and Public Affairs in Later Medieval England* (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press/ Boydell and Brewer, 2000), pp. 85-91.Back to (4)
5. With the exception of places such as York Minster, where Henry's statue was revered as that of a saint. Back to (5)
6. It is to be hoped that the book is forthcoming.Back to (6)
7. J. H. Wylie and W. T. Waugh, *The Reign of Henry the Fifth* (3 vols, Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1914-29), 1, pp. 504-507.Back to (7)
8. The links with the Papal Curia under Henry V also need to be investigated, in the light of Hughes's statements: Hughes, p. 238.Back to (8)
9. In 1455, Henry's government owed large sums of money to Richard, duke of York, Edward's father. For the financial situation of 1455-6, see R. A. Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI* (Sutton; Stroud, 1981), pp. 754-6.Back to (9)
10. Erghome cannot have written the verses known as the Bridlington prophecies, which were in existence before 1338. He was, however, connected with John Thweng, 'St John', prior of Bridlington, although Erghome himself was living and working in York when he wrote his commentary on the prophecies. A. G. Rigg, 'John of Bridlington's Prophecy: a new look', *Speculum*, 63 (1988), 596-613; Coote, *Prophecy and Public Affairs*, pp. 138-140.Back to (10)
11. M. R. James, 'The catalogue of the Library of the Augustinian Friars at York', in *Fasciculus Joanni Willis Clark dicatus* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1909), pp. 2-96; K. W. Humphreys, 'The library of John Erghome and personal libraries of the fourteenth century in England', *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society*, 18 (1982), 106-23. This 'scientific' tradition in York and Bridlington may very well have influenced Neville, as archbishop of York, but

certainly would have influenced the Percy family (the lords of Holderness), one of whom owned British Library MS Cotton Vespasian E VII. Extracts from *Rupescissa* can be found in other English 'prophecy' manuscripts, although very infrequently, from c.1350 (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 138) onwards.Back to (11)

12. M. Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Clarendon Press; Oxford, 1969), pp. 320-32; E. F. Jacob, 'John of Roquetaillade', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 39 (1956), 75-96; Coote, *Prophecy and Public Affairs*, pp. 136-8.Back to (12)

13. Henry V would not have gone this far. Henry, being an extremely religious man, might view the state as part of his religion, but he undoubtedly saw himself as a great religious *reformer*. His task was to make the Church more holy (hence his proposed reform of the Benedictine order, his new religious houses, his support of the reforming Emperor Sigismund at the Council of Constance, and his attempt to have Henry Beaufort elected Pope), not to secularize it. Interestingly, I arrive at a similar view on Henry V to that of Hughes, but using somewhat different evidence: Coote, *Prophecy and Public Affairs*, pp. 172-82.Back to (13)

14. Coote, *Prophecy and Public Affairs,* pp. 177-216.Back to (14)

15. F. J. Furnivall, ed, *Henry Lovelich: The History of the Holy Grail, Englisht, ab. 1450 AD by H. Lovelich, from the French prose of R. de Borron*, EETS OS 20, 24, 28, 30, 95 (3 vols, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner; London, 1874-1905). Also see J. W. McKenna, 'Henry VI of England and the dual monarchy: aspects of royal political propaganda, 1422-32', *Journal of the Courtauld and Warburg Institutes*, 28 (1965), 145-62; J. H. Rowe, 'King Henry VI's claim to France in picture and poem', *The Library*, 4th series 13 (1932), 77-88.Back to (15)

16. In the first version (pre-1461) of Hardyng's *Chronicle*, the arms of Arthur occur after an address to Henry VI imploring him to take care of England, and the association of the Round Table with the last supper also occurs in the first version. The only difference after 1461 is the association of Winchester with the Table's site. Although Hardyng chastises Henry VI for allowing law and order to break down, he depicts Henry as a king who is able to take command of this and to help his people, in the same manner as his glorious ancestors. The prologue is dedicated to Henry VI, Queen Margaret and Prince Edward, so that Edward, too, can learn from his great ancestors. Henry's simplicity is only mentioned in the *second* (post-1461) version. I am very grateful to Sarah Peverley, of the University of Hull, for her comments on this; she has just completed an edition of Hardyng's *Chronicle*.Back to (16)

17. A problem for historians in general is that of 'party' labels. If the head of a faction is the king, he will be supported by both partisans and those who support him simply because he *is* the king (and who may immediately change sides after a change of ruler such as those of 1461, 1469 and 1471). Thus, before 1461 it is only possible to speak of 'loyalists' and 'Yorkists', and after 1461 'loyalists' and 'Lancastrians'. It is misleading to speak of 'Yorkists', or of 'Yorkist prophecies' after 1461, as the head of the House of York was the king.Back to (17)

18. Presumably, this is on the grounds that genealogies are confusing documents, even when they have been illustrated and explained as well as they are in the book. Compilations, of course, have their limitations for researchers.Back to (18)

19. These are British Library MS Cotton Vespasian E VII and Bodleian Library MS Bodley 623. Both contain anthologies of prophetic texts, and several of the prophecies are the same or similar. Others, however, are not. Cotton Vespasian E VII contains the *Calendarium* of John Somer, the Fifteen Signs before the Judgement, the genealogy of Joseph and Mary, and a 'man of signs', showing the impact of the zodiac on the body. Bodley 623 contains a Calendar for London and a chronology of the world from Creation to 1464. It also has far fewer prophetic texts than the Vespasian manuscript. Names are also given to genealogies, presumably to help distinguish the different versions from one another. There is a better justification for this, but the problem is that readers in future may forget that the names were not those given by the *medieval* 'authors'. See K. Busby, *Faux Titre, Volume 1: Codex and Context: Reading Old French Verse Narrative in Manuscript* (Rodopi; Amsterdam, 2002), for examples of possible consequences (in the case of Old French *fabliau* manuscripts).Back to (19)

20. Hughes vividly depicts Edward charming people into contributing 'benevolences' to his French expedition of 1475, being crafty, skilful, feared and a charismatic leader on his progress through England to regain his crown in 1471, being resourceful and courageous in battle at all times, yet also

being vengeful, cruel and avaricious in the late 1470s. His career, his interests, and his turbulent life, mirror those of contemporary Italian princes. The most lasting impression of all is probably the spectacle of Tiptoft's 'impalings' of 1470; a very 'Italian' touch (Hughes, p. 250).Back to (20)

Other reviews:
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