



From the Romans to the Normans on the English Renaissance Stage

Lisa Hopkins



EARLY DRAMA, ART, AND MUSIC

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Chapter 7

Athelstan, the Virgin King

THREE EARLY MODERN PLAYS feature King Athelstan: *The Welsh Ambassador* (1621), the anonymous *Guy of Warwick*, which is difficult to date but may possibly belong to the 1590s, and Dekker's *Old Fortunatus* (1599). I shall be arguing that the reasons these playwrights turn to Athelstan is that they find him a flexible, suggestive and culturally resonant figure who could be used to discuss a number of important issues, including succession, the status of the monarch, and the relationship of early modern English identities to the histories which had produced them. Athelstan, often considered the first king of England, was a rich and complicated figure, not least because, according to which account you believed, there were at least four kings of that name: John Bridges in *A defence of the government established in the Church of Englande for ecclesiasticall matters* is one of a number of writers to remember that the Danish king Guthrum took the name Athelstane after Alfred the Great persuaded him to accept baptism;¹ Robert Persons mentions in *A conference about the next succession to the crowne of Inghland* that "Etheldred [the Unready] had by his first wife other two sonnes named Edwin and Adelston";² and in his study of Athelstan's England Paul Hill notes that "During Athelstan's reign, a figure appears in East Anglia who was himself called Athelstan, but nicknamed 'Half-King'."³ The figure in whom both I and the Renaissance are interested, though, is none of these: he is the illegitimate son of Edward the Elder and the grandson of Alfred the Great, and he reigned as undisputed king of England from 925 to 939.

Although Paul Hill declares that "when history was re-written again in the Tudor period, Athelstan was all but lost," something which Hill is inclined to attribute to "the fact that the Tudor line traced itself from the very dynasty which Athelstan had all but crushed,"⁴ Athelstan was in his day a hugely important figure. Hill notes that by the time he came to the throne, "the Danish armies had succeeded in eliminating

all but one of the early English dynasties,” the exception being the royal house of Wessex;⁵ according to his biographer William of Malmesbury, Athelstan’s status as heir to that house was confirmed in a semi-official investiture by his grandfather Alfred the Great. Athelstan used that as a launchpad to develop Alfred’s “new ‘kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons’” to the point where “the king of Wessex would no longer be *Westsaxena cinge*, but *Angol Saxonum rex*,”⁶ and indeed even more than that: Athelstan’s charters term him *basileus*, *imperator*, and *rex*, and Camden calls him “the first English King that brought this countrey absolute under his dominion.”⁷ As Drayton notes, Athelstan was the first English king to wear a crown (though Drayton regards the mythical Molmutius as the first *British* king to have done so,⁸ and Shakespeare has Cymbeline concur that Molmutius “was the first of Britain which did put / His brows within a golden crown, and call’d / Himself a king”).⁹ In addition, Athelstan may or may not have been the first to actually undergo a coronation ceremony, at Kingston upon Thames,¹⁰ but certainly “His reign is the first in which we have a numismatic portrayal of a crowned head,”¹¹ and we have numerous images of him crowned,¹² including several which were in the possession of Sir Robert Cotton and so could have been known to Jacobean and Caroline writers; certainly in Dekker’s *Old Fortunatus* Athelstane rather pointedly says “By my crowne I sweare” (sig. G3r), and *Guy of Warwick* too contains a reference to Athelstan’s crown.

Athelstan devoted particular attention to securing the borders of his new kingdom of England, something in which he was probably influenced by the example of his aunt Athelflede, Lady of the Mercians, whose building program essentially plotted a border between Mercia and the Danelaw.¹³ He was the first to fix the border between England and Wales at the Wye and that between England and Cornwall at the Tamar; it may therefore not be coincidence that *Old Fortunatus* has an earl of Cornwall and an earl of Chester, and so too does *The Welsh Ambassador*. He was also credited with subduing the Isles of Scilly and founding the abbey of St. Burien in token of his suzerainty,¹⁴ as well as subduing the Scots and extracting homage from them and from the Welsh. He fostered the heirs to the thrones or ducal chairs of Norway, France, and Brittany, brought the Welsh kings Hywel Dda and Idwal Foel into his affinity, and his engineering of royal marriages for several of his eight sisters made him almost like Queen Victoria in his use of relatives to construct a network of European royal cousins. He exercised influence outside England in other ways too: Sir Frank Shenton notes that when Athelstan sent a fleet to help

his foster-son and nephew Louis d'Outremer after the Germans invaded Lotharingia it was "the first occasion on which an English king is known to have assembled a fleet in order to help a continental ally."¹⁵

Nor was Athelstan as forgotten as we might suppose, for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were well aware of much of this, not least because Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain* ends with Athelstan.¹⁶ In 1589, in his account of how he traveled with his master Henry Cavendish (son of Bess of Hardwick) to Constantinople, a servant who identifies himself only as "Fox" noted that in Magdeburg "ther ys a great church called the Doome, and ther we wear shewed the toome of Edethe the Emperesse, the wyf of Ottan, Emperour. Thys Edethe was the daughter [actually sister] of Ethellstane, Kyng of England."¹⁷ Camden quotes William of Malmesbury (whose *De Gestis Regum Anglorum* was edited by Sir Henry Savile in 1596) as saying that Alfred knighted Athelstan;¹⁸ at least one scholar (Nowell) knew the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle;¹⁹ and the collection of Sir Robert Cotton included an extensive collection of Anglo-Saxon charters, among which Athelstan, a great issuer of charters, was well represented, as well as a book given to Athelstan by his brother-in-law Otto the Great of Germany, who also gave him Constantine's sword.²⁰ Sarah Foot remarks on a poem in praise of Athelstan found in a Cotton MS and on the fact that "Leland reported that he had seen several books at Bath with inscriptions reporting their donation by Æthelstan," and notes too that Cotton owned a miniature of Athelstan with St. Cuthbert which is now lost,²¹ while Leland's *Itinerary* declares that Athelstan gave the borough of Barnstaple its privileges and that he gave an estate in Pilton to Malmesbury Abbey.²² Cotton also had coins of Athelstan, and Marion Archibald notes that "in 1611 Cotton's collection was the source of Anglo-Saxon coins used to illustrate John Speed's *History of Great Brittain*";²³ both Cotton and Speed would therefore have known that Athelstan's coins call him variously "Rex totius Britanniae" and "Rex Saxorum," and Cotton also possessed a book in which Athelstan is referred to as "Anglorum basilyeos et curagulus totius Brytanniae."²⁴

Early modern writers had a number of reasons to be interested in this long-dead king. In the first place, Athelstan was like Elizabeth in that he never married. He may possibly have followed the model of his aunt Athelflede, who according to Thomas Heywood, who includes her in his list of English Viragoes, broke off conjugal relations after the difficult birth of her only child:²⁵

This Lady having once assaid the throwes of childbirth, would never after be drawn to have any carnall society with her husband, alledging that it was not fitting or seemly for a woman of her degree being a Princesse, a Kings daughter, and a Kings sister, to inure her selfe to such wanton embraces, whereof should ensue so great pain and sorrow.²⁶

Since he cannot have feared childbirth, though, this does not seem very likely. It is also of course possible that Athelstan's decision not to marry was a matter of sexual preference, but this is not an idea that any Renaissance text that I know of is interested in exploring; Athelstan may, as we shall see, be like Richard II, but no surviving play wants or needs him to be like Edward II. However, it is more probable that there was a political reason for his celibacy, and that it centered on the idea that he was a suitable candidate to reign but not to sire a successor. Sarah Foot suggests that the issue about the succession was that all of Athelstan's younger brothers "had been born to a ruling king,"²⁷ but it is more generally taken to be connected to his illegitimacy, with the theory being that he may have deliberately chosen celibacy in recognition of the unmarried status of his mother, as a means of ensuring that although he might reign, he would not act as a transmitter of the royal bloodline, which would revert instead to one of the thirteen legitimate children of his father Edward the Elder: thus, as Robert Persons has it in *A conference about the next succession to the crowne of England*, "This man dying without issue, his lawful brother Edmond, put back before, was admitted to the crowne."²⁸

There is some very slight evidence to suggest that this failure to marry was perceived as odd. In William Haughton's *Grim the Collier of Croyden*, the ghost of St. Dunstan says that, when he was alive:

I flourish'd in the reign of Seven great Kings;
The first was Adelstane, whose Neece Elflida
Malicious tongues reported, I defiled.²⁹

There is something rather titillating here about the way that a suggestion of sexual misconduct, explicitly associated with the name of Athelstan, is simultaneously proffered and withdrawn, as if there were something that could not quite be said. There are also a number of tantalizing references to a wife for Athelstan which seem to imagine her almost as a concept or formula rather than as a real person. Hill notes that the medieval *Athelston* romance gives him a pregnant wife, though the baby dies when he kicks her in the stomach.³⁰ More suggestively, Holinshed declares that "there

was a charter found of certeine lands giuen by King Athelstane, in this forme: *Athelstane giues to Paullane, Odhiam and Rodhiam, als guid and als faire, als euer yay mine waire, and yarto witnessse Mauld my wife,*³¹ and John Selden in *Titles of honor* also mentions a charter issued by Athelstan which supposedly refers to “Maulde my wife.”³² Intriguingly, Paul Hill notes that “at Malmesbury in 1380 it was recorded that prayers were to be said for the soul of a Maud, Athelstan’s wife, at St. John the Baptist Chapel, set up by the burgesses in ca. 1180,”³³ but there is no mention of her anywhere in the historical record, and a likelier explanation seems to be the apparent existence of an English proverb, mentioned by Robert Dallington in *Aphorismes ciuill and militarie amplified with authorities*: “Heretofore in our lawes of England, this was a strong Conueyance; *I giue from me and mine ... Witnessse Maude my wife.*”³⁴ Certainly Samuel Daniel notes Athelstan’s childlessness,³⁵ and Speed his failure to marry,³⁶ so despite the mentions of Maud he does seem to have been understood as a celibate. Suggestively, Paul Hill notes that in the medieval *Athelston* romance “There is an obvious connection in the tale between Athelstan’s tyranny and that of Richard II, about whom the poet is probably writing.”³⁷ The parallel between the childless Richard and the childless Elizabeth was one often drawn; to this well-known pairing I suggest that Athelstan could profitably be added as a third term. As Hill observes, *Old Fortunatus*, one of the texts I shall be discussing, “was performed in front of Queen Elizabeth I and the words of Virtue toward the end of the play seem to be loaded with meaning and intended for her ears”;³⁸ indeed the Prologue specifically observes “Some cal her Pandora: some Gloriana, some Cynthia: some [B]elphaebe, some Astraea” (sig. A1v), and it might therefore be suggestive that Andelocia should say to Agripyne “I tell you I am not giuen to the flesh” (sig. H2r), while in *Guy of Warwick*, the visits of the Winchester-based Athelstone to Warwick might well look rather like a Progress. In this context, Sparrow’s question “But I pray tell me one thing, is the King a Man or a Woman?” (5.360) may not be as stupid as it seems. Literally, the king is of course a man, but symbolically I think he may well be a woman, and the celibate Athelstan provided a powerful lens for examining the benefits and logic of a celibate lifestyle not only as practiced by monks, nuns, and hermits such as Guy became, but also by implication as practiced by Elizabeth herself.

However, Athelstan was also like James in that, as Sir Frank Shenton observes, “His recognition as king of the Mercians was independent of his election in Wessex.”³⁹ *The Welsh Ambassador* in particular is acutely aware

of its status as a Jacobean play, in that the Clown prophesies what will happen in the years 1621, 1622 and 1623 (5.3), and one of its authors, the Devon-born John Ford, would certainly have had reasons to be interested in Athelstan. According to Camden, tombs of the Saxon lords who fell at Brunanburh, Athelstan's most famous battle whose actual site has never been located, were still visible at Axminster, and he went on to observe that Axminster belonged to the Mohuns, to whom Ford's play *The Queen* was later dedicated.⁴⁰ Moreover, Sarah Foot notes that Athelstan supposedly rebuilt Exeter and regards it as probable that "the core of Exeter's relic collection came directly from the minster in Exeter from King Æthelstan."⁴¹ I have suggested elsewhere that it was not a foregone conclusion that England and Scotland would stay united under one ruler after the death of James, and that in *Perkin Warbeck* Ford might be hinting at alternative succession scenarios.⁴² As I shall discuss later, *The Welsh Ambassador* too plays with historical fact in ways which suggest that it may not always be possible to predict who will inherit a throne. In what may well look like a sly challenge to the authority of the Stuarts, *The Welsh Ambassador* is a play which has never heard of Scotland, although Eldred fought the Welsh but stayed on as a friend and even learned some Welsh (2.2.115–18) and Edmond did the same in Ireland (2.2.121–22);⁴³ there is also a song and dance of Edmond, Eldred, and Clown who define themselves as respectively Irish, Welsh, and English (5.2.108–12). Athelstan might have ruled both Wessex and Mercia, but he did not found a dynasty and the two kingdoms did not stay united. He might, therefore, have afforded a way for talking about the first Stuart as well as the last Tudor.

Seventeenth-century writers might also just conceivably have been aware that Athelstan plays an extremely important part in the legends of the Freemasons. Arthur H. Williamson observes that "[i]n the late 1590s Scottish stonemasons organized themselves into semi-secret 'lodges' which were independent of their incorporated municipal guilds."⁴⁴ These were the forerunners of the freemasons, whose secret knowledge supposedly relates to the construction of Solomon's Temple on principles said to have been learned from the builders of the pyramids. I have argued elsewhere that it may be possible to detect some awareness of freemasonry in Shakespeare's Egyptian play *Antony and Cleopatra*,⁴⁵ and Richard Wilson has observed that "according to his assistant Nicholas Stone, from 1607 to 1652 the Grand Master of the English Lodge was none other than [Inigo] Jones, whose designs frequently incorporated Masonic symbols."⁴⁶ As Paul Hill observes, "Modern Freemasons claim that their origins lie in the

measures that Athelstan took to protect traders,⁴⁷ and the Masonic Order of Athelstan believes itself to date from 926 and to have been founded by Athelstan in York, after he had become the first southern English king to reclaim it from the Vikings. (When the King's Stone at Kingston upon Thames, upon which Anglo-Saxon monarchs were crowned, was moved to its present location in the nineteenth century, it was accompanied by a procession with full masonic honors.) It might therefore be suggestive that Lambarde, whose *Alphabetical Description* appears to use masonic language when it speaks of "the true squared Doctrine of Jesus Christ, the onlie Corner Stonne of infalible Buildinge," should interest himself in Athelstan, mentioning "Editha the sister of King Athelstane" and declaring that Padstow was originally Adelstow, "Athelstan's place,"⁴⁸ and it is just possibly pertinent that at least one version of the Guy of Warwick story, Samuel Rowlands' 1609 poem, places great stress on the fact that Guy meets Athelstan at York (sig. K2r), for the Guy story itself may, as we shall see, possibly have had masonic or at least esoteric connections.

David Griffith notes that "the interweaving of the histories of Athelstan and Guy ... became a common feature of Anglo-Norman and French versions of the legend, and thereby found its way into English accounts,"⁴⁹ and Martha Driver adds to this that in some versions of Guy's story Guy's son Rainborn or Reinbroun marries Athelstan's daughter (Driver is aware that historically Athelstan had no children but notes that "The twelfth-century *Liber Eliensis* does refer to a daughter of Athelstan, an 'Aedida filia regis Aedelstani', who is otherwise unattested").⁵⁰ One thing that is certainly evoked when Athelstan is connected to the Guy of Warwick story is the king's interest in borders. The first known fortification at Warwick was built in 914 by Athelstan's aunt Athelflede, Lady of the Mercians and daughter of Alfred the Great, as a defense against the Danes; it subsequently became Warwick Castle, and both Shakespeare and Drayton were of course Warwickshire men, with Shakespeare probably responsible for the line late in *Henry VIII*, "I am not Samson, nor Sir Guy, nor Colbrand."⁵¹ In the anonymous play *Guy of Warwick* (sometimes attributed to Drayton), local connections are strongly stressed. Time exhorts us:

To grace this bridal feast, imagine then,
King Athelstone hath left fair Winchester
And here in Warwick Castle keeps his court.⁵²

Later, Time says of Guy that:

in a forrest not far from the place,
 a mile distant called Arden wood,
 with his own hands he builds himself a cave. (5.7–9)

Sparrow says he was born at Stratford, and Athelstone concludes the play by announcing that

the shield-bone of the bore of Callidon,
 shall be hang'd up at Coventries great Gate;
 the ribs of the Dun Cow of Dunsmore Heath,
 in Warwick Castle for a monument;
 and on his Cave where he hath left his life,
 a stately Hermitage I will erect,
 in honour of Sir Guy of Warwicks Name. (5.475–81)

Since an alleged rib of the Dun Cow is still to be seen at Warwick Castle, this would obviously strike a chord, but in the specific context of Athelflede and Athelstan the story of Guy of Warwick becomes a matter not simply of local legend but of national survival, and indeed in Speed's *The Theatre of the Empire of Great Britain* we find the stakes of Guy's victory over Colbrand the Dane described as simply "the liberty of *England*."⁵³ The contours of the Danish occupation inevitably varied over time (in *Edmund Ironside*, for instance, the polarities are Southampton and Chester, each represented by their respective earls), but Warwickshire lay in the heart of the conflict zone. Paul Hill notes that "The English translations of the Anglo-Norman *Gui de Warewic* of ca. 1230 have Athelstan summoning his council to deliberate on the impending invasion of King Anlaf of Denmark."⁵⁴ In the *Guy of Warwick* play, what is being staged is clearly a confrontation between nations when a stage direction announces "Enter Swanus King of Denmark, with him Colbron. Then Athelstone King of England, with him Herod" (4.30 s.d.). Swanus announces the terms of engagement as being that "thy homage and thy Princely Crown, / will Swanus bear to Denmark as his own" (4.41–42), with a possible nod to Athelstan's status as first crowned king, and the defeat of Colbrand signals the end of the Danelaw as Swanus says "now force perforce, to Denmark we must go" (4.197). It has even been suggested that beneath the seemingly ridiculous Dun Cow may lurk the words *Dena Gau*, the Danes' kingdom;⁵⁵ that rib in Warwick Castle may speak not of a fearsome ruminant but of national sovereignty and the establishing of England's borders.

It is therefore not surprising that in Samuel Rowlands' long poem *The famous history of Guy Earle of Warwicke*, first published in 1609 and

dedicated “To the Honourable Ladyes of England,” Guy is presented as a formative figure in English national identity. The second stanza of the dedication asserts a fundamental connection between England and Englishness by speaking of “worthy English, bred where wee are borne.”⁵⁶ However, the Argument immediately introduces a tension by presenting the heroine Phelice, daughter of the earl of Warwick and Guy’s future wife, in terms which offer a heady mixture of Christian and classical contexts: “in a vision Cupid presents her with the picture of Mars, inioyning her to loue Guy as the admired Champion of Christendome” (sig. A4v). The idea of mating with Mars aligns Phelice with Rhea Silvia, whose coupling with the god produced Romulus and Remus and was thus foundational to Rome, but like Romulus and Remus two things are in conflict here, for Guy, the new Mars, is to be the champion of Christianity. Rowlands’ poem presents Guy as a heroic figure by keeping at bay the potentially comic story of the Dun Cow and presenting instead a warrior who specializes in fighting with giants, monsters and dragons and who may therefore be justly termed “Englands Hector” (sig. L1r). Guy’s great moment comes when the invading Danes force the King Athelstane of the play back to Winchester (sig. O4r), and Guy takes up a challenge to single combat issued by the Danish champion Colbrand. As in other versions, the stakes of the fight are made quite clear: the caption to the accompanying illustration declares:

Guy fights to free all Englands feares,
 With Colbrond Gyant Dane:
 And in Hide-mead at Winchester,
 Was that Goliah slaine. (sig. P1v)

Hyde Abbey at Winchester was famous as the burial place of Alfred the Great, though his bones had been lost at the Reformation;⁵⁷ here that loss is imaginatively undone as Guy, telling Colbrand that “The King hath ventur’d England on my Head,” wins the fight, halts the Danish occupation, and preserves the authorizing link to the classical past which validates a secure, imperial, English identity. This is also a scene which allows us to glimpse something of the usefulness and versatility of Athelstan as a figure. In fact Sarah Foot suggests that the historical Athelstan had an antipathy to Winchester,⁵⁸ repaying the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’s* marginalization of him by choosing to be buried at Malmesbury rather than with his forefathers in Winchester; here, though, associating Athelstan with Winchester makes him synecdochic of the Anglo-Saxon dynasty as

a whole and a type of his famous grandfather in particular. It might even help explain the apparent mystery of why there are so few early modern plays about Alfred the Great himself; there don't need to be, if Athelstan can do duty for him.

Athelstan is certainly a figure whom a number of playwrights seem to have found interesting; Helen Cooper observes that "Although there is only one surviving text of a Guy play, it seems likely that one dramatic version or another could have been seen in every decade from the 1580s to the closing of the theatres in 1642."⁵⁹ Paul Hill notes of Dekker's play *Old Fortunatus* that its "Athelstan, even at the beginning of the seventeenth century, still seems to embody some of the characteristics that were displayed by the later medieval literary Athelstans, a strong grip on power being one of them";⁶⁰ as we have seen, Athelstan needed such a grip because his hereditary claim was weak, given that he was the only illegitimate child among his father's thirteen or fourteen offspring. In particular, Athelstan seems to have been of considerable interest to Dekker: Cooper notes that *A play of the life and death of Guy of Warwicke* by Dekker and Day was licensed on 15 January 1620,⁶¹ and Athelstan also figures in another play partly by Dekker, *The Welsh Ambassador*, where the idea of uncertain bloodline is crucial. "The Welsh ambassador" was a common name for the cuckoo, and although the derivations customarily offered for this usage trace it back to the idea of seasonal migratory Welsh workers, whose advent in England was supposedly heralded by the cuckoo, the word cuckoo was often connected in the early modern mind with cuckold, and the play itself strongly hints at this association: when the Clown asks, "what is the reason that wee English men when the cuckoe is vpon entrance saie the welsh ambassador is cominge," Eldred at once replies "Let anie rascall sonne of whores come into *Cardigan, Flint, Merioneth, Clamorgan* or *Brecknock* and dare prade so."⁶² Eldred's phrase "sonne of whores" suggests that the name is offensive but also connects it to bastardy, an idea underlined when in the final scene the Clown dresses up as Vulcan, whose status as sign of cuckoldry is confirmed by references such as Demetrius' in *Titus Andronicus*, "Better than he have worn Vulcan's badge."⁶³

The Welsh Ambassador is set in the reign of a king called Athelstane, and in some ways shows considerable awareness of the career of the historical Athelstan, in ways which bear on the idea of questionable legitimacy. It features a duke of Colchester and a bishop of Winchester, and both are resonant titles in the context of the historical Athelstan. Sarah Foot notes

that Athelstan's father Edward the Elder had sacked Colchester, though he had then refounded it,⁶⁴ and at one point the Colchester of the play, sending defiance to the king, orders the messenger to "saie tis *Colchester* that speakes it" (3.1.109). Colchester, the oldest recorded Roman town in Britain, was the oldest town *tout court* if the British History was not to be believed; however, while Colchester may be the oldest title, the man who holds it in the play has only recently acquired it, and he has done so through his daughter's shame. I have already mentioned the suggestion that the historical Athelstan was not wholly comfortable in the Wessex dynasty's traditional capital of Winchester, and the play's bishop of Winchester is certainly opposed to Athelstan, being one of those who seek to uphold the written contract between the king and his cast-off lover Armante, which the king is desperate to retrieve and destroy so that he can be free to pursue his new love interest. This might well recall the armed peace between Athelstan and the historic Wessex capital of Winchester, whose chronicler refused to note his accession and where he did not choose to be buried. The stress on the written contract might well reflect the historical Athelstan's prolific issuing of charters, and when Carintha notes the impressive range of signatories to the contract (3.3.1–3), that chimes with the fact that the historical Athelstan did indeed tend to have his charters witnessed by an impressive range of dignitaries.⁶⁵

In particular, *The Welsh Ambassador* delicately surfaces the difficult question of Athelstan's brother, Edwin. As Sir Frank Shenton observes:

Under the year 933 a Northumbrian annalist states gauntly that "King Athelstan ordered Edwin his brother to be drowned in the sea." Anglo-Norman writers expanded this tradition into a pitiful story of Edwin's sufferings and Athelstan's remorse. Fortunately for Athelstan's memory the monks of St. Bertin in Flanders remembered his gratitude for the burial which they had given to his brother Edwin, drowned in a storm while escaping from England in a time of commotion.⁶⁶

Whether he drowned or not, Edwin does seem to have been something of a sore point with the king, with Paul Hill even suggesting that "Hywel [Dda] named one of his sons Edwin, perhaps not as a sycophantic acknowledgement to England, but as a way of irritating Athelstan."⁶⁷ Hill also notes that there is a distinctively masonic version of the episode:

Their tale places the whole incident in the bay of Weymouth, stating that Edwin had returned from a trip to the Orient whence he had

brought back the secrets of Freemasonry. Edwin, it is said, created the first English lodge at Ely which soon aroused the interest of the king who summoned him to his court at Weymouth to explain himself. Edwin refused to reveal the secrets of the lodge or even account for what was said at their meetings. He did, however, offer to make an oath of allegiance to the king, provided he was not made to break his vow of secrecy. The anger of the king rose, and he set his brother adrift in the boat.⁶⁸

Many early modern writers refer to the Edwin story. John Foxe in *Actes and Monuments* mentions that Athelstan killed his brother Edwin and subsequently founded two monasteries, and adds later “Such malicious make-bates about Princes and parliaments, neuer lacked in common weales. By such lying Ethelstane was incensed to kill his brother Edwin”;⁶⁹ Camden declares that Athelstan founded Middleton Abbey to appease the ghost of Edwin.⁷⁰

In *The Welsh Ambassador*, the king’s brothers are Edmond and Eldred, but the opening stage direction names an “Edwin” who never speaks and never appears again, and this ghost character does indeed prefigure a haunting. Edmund and Eadred were historically the names of Athelstan’s two brothers by his father’s second wife, and he was much closer to them than to Edwin and Alfwearð, the two sons of the first marriage: indeed Sarah Foot notes that “According to William of Malmesbury, Æthelstan showed remarkable affection towards his younger brothers.”⁷¹ In the play, however, Edmond and Eldred have just returned from France, to which Athelstane has sent an army, where attempts were made on both their lives with the result that they are now disguised and pretending to be dead. In effect, the Edwin story has thus been transposed onto them, and it also appears in other forms in the play. When Carintha assures him that she is not weeping for her husband, Athelstane says that it would be “pitty to drowne / sich a rich land of bewtie in salt water” (1.2.55–56); shortly after, he tells her “wee both haue sea roome” (1.2.67). The imagery of drowning surely glances at Edwin, and I wonder too if we should take note of Richard Wilson’s suggestion that if Athelstane deliberately took himself out of the line of succession, this mirrors “the division between church and state, the kingdom and the glory, that philosopher Giorgio Agamben sees as the inception of Western democracy, encoded in the legend of the weak or Fisher King, who ‘goes fishing’ because he does not rule but reigns.”⁷² What then does it mean that in *The Welsh Ambassador* Voltimar speaks to Armante of “that little kings fisher (your sonne)” (3.1.134)? The Fisher

King first appears in Chrétien de Troyes, and is first found in English in the *Morte d'Arthur*, though Malory's "King Pescheour" seems to represent a misunderstanding or mistranslation of the French original. I know of no evidence that either Ford or Dekker had read either Chrétien or Malory, but equally I know of no evidence that they had not, or that they might not have come across the idea in conversation. We are on delicate and tentative ground here, but it could perhaps be the case that the use of the term "king's fisher" serves to associate Athelstan with the idea of sacred kingship.

There certainly seems to be esoteric matter in another Athelstan play. In *Guy of Warwick*, Guy is helped on his travels by Oberon, whom Sparrow mishears as Colbron (2.255) but whom the audience will know well enough to be a magic figure, while Guy's declaration to Athelstone that "at your yearly feast of Pentecost / will Guy of Warwick send a hundred Knights" (1.47–48) clearly works to associate him with Arthur, whose feasts of Pentecost are a regular feature of narratives dealing with the matter of Britain and led directly to the quest of the grail. Later, Guy swears chastity for twenty-seven years. No reason is ever given, and we know the marriage has been consummated because he leaves Phillis pregnant, but the play is clearly nervous about Guy's decision. The clown Philip Sparrow parodies the Guy plot; he leaves because he has got a girl into trouble. The inclusion of this cruder version suggests the play's discomfort with Guy's pilgrimage and vow of chastity. Guy also gives Phillis the ominous-seeming injunction "Give it to Herod if it be a son" (1.130) and Athelstone mentions "King Solomon's Temple" (3.81). I do not know what these allusions mean, but I do wonder if they mean *something*, and specifically if they relate to freemasonry's interest in ordeals and in Solomon's Temple. If that were the case, it would support the suggestion that there might be a similar significance in *The Welsh Ambassador's* treatment of the Edwin story.

Despite its obvious interest in and knowledge of the historical Athelstan, *The Welsh Ambassador* has made a number of significant changes to the traditional figure of the king. Like Brome's *The Queen's Exchange* after it, it reprises both *Lear* and *Macbeth*. *Lear* is clearly echoed by the fact that the characters include a Cornwall, an Edmund, and a Kent, and a fool who prophesies (5.3.49–50), talks about eggs (3.1.29–30) and mentions "dover peere" (1.3.26–27); the play also features a king of England, a journey to France and various disguises, and the villainous Voltimar tells the cast-off Armante "maddam I am to dischargd all your followers"

(3.1.90). As for *Macbeth*, Cornwall's stoical reaction to the apparent death of his son Penda, in a situation which is, as in *Macbeth*, one of the assassination of noblemen at the king's instigation, recalls Siward's response to the death of Young Siward (1.1.37–39), and the King himself says "since thou hast waded / For mee thus vpp to th'middle, on now deere *Voltimar*" (2.1.152–53), again recalling *Macbeth*. Moreover the plot subverts the whole idea of legitimate bloodline, which is central to both *Macbeth* and *Lear*, since for most of the play the prince is illegitimate but when his parents marry he is suddenly and miraculously legitimized. The stigma of illegitimacy is thus displaced from Athelstan onto his son, and even then it is only temporary.

In this tactic of allusion to earlier plays *The Welsh Ambassador* echoes an approach which one of its authors, Dekker, had already adopted to Athelstan in his 1600 play *Old Fortunatus*, which echoes both Marlowe and Shakespeare, but only in order to pit them against each other. Toward the beginning of the play we hear of Bazajet, Tamburlaine, and four harnessed kings (sig. B1r), and *Fortunatus*' name echoes *Faustus*' and he too begins by making a choice; later a number of characters acquire horns which only *Andelocia* can remove. At the same time *Henry V* is echoed by the Chorus' "Suppose you see him brought to Babylon" and *Agripyne*'s declaration that she likes a soldier's wooing best because it is plain.⁷³ We seem, then, to be simultaneously in both the history-world of *Henry V* and the allegory-world of *Doctor Faustus*, and to be both in the fifteenth century and the modern world. This simultaneous evocation of and unmooring from the past is symptomatic of the wider tactics of Dekker's play. *Old Fortunatus* highlights the idea of Trojan ancestry—*Fortunatus* compares his initial choice between riches and wisdom to "his whose fatall choice Troyes downfall wrought" (sig. B2v) and *Shadow* says "These English occupiers are mad Troians" (sig. G34)—but the Athelstan of the play is wrenched loose from his historical context in that he is a contemporary of the Soldan, the Prince of Cyprus, Prester John, and the Great Cham of Tartary (and postdates *Bajazet* and *Tamburlaine*, as well as living in the age of tobacco, as evidenced by the figure "that leane tawnie face Tobacconist death" [sig. B3r]). It may also be worrying that it is the Soldan rather than any English heir of Troy who is the present possessor of "The ball of gold that set all Troy on fire" (sig. D2r), as we know since he offers to show it to *Fortunatus*. *Old Fortunatus* is, then, a play which evokes the heroic and epic past only to unmoor it from the present.

The Welsh Ambassador performs a similar act of unmooring when it fantasizes a marriage for Athelstan, even though the marriage does not occur until after the birth of the king's son, who is therefore illegitimate, though it is made clear that this stain could be wiped out if his parents do eventually marry (1.2.101–3). As well as thus silently revising the story of Athelstane's own illegitimacy and subsequent succession by transposing it onto the son it has invented for him, the play makes little secret of the fact that its story of a long-ago succession crisis encodes a sharp glance at a more recent one: the king/Armante/Carintha triangle revisits and recasts the Henry VIII/Catherine of Aragon/Anne Boleyn triangle, and indeed Armante echoes language used of Anne when she says "A royall concubine can bee no more / Then a greate glorious vncontrolled whore" (3.3.62–63), while Voltimar's question to the disguised princes and Penda "Did not I steere your course well at our cominge out of *Fraunce* to land you in *Wales*" (2.2.99–100) is an obvious glance at the Tudor landing in Milford Haven, and the Clown's reference to "four flanders mares" (5.3.67) equally obviously alludes to Henry VIII's rejection of Anne of Cleves. This topicality suggests that the play is no historical curiosity, but is raising questions which still matter about legitimacy and inheritance and is, as Athelstan so often does, looking directly at the Tudors and Stuarts.

There is also the question of what is to be inherited. As we have seen, the historical Athelstan was a fixer of borders. The Athelstane of *The Welsh Ambassador*, though, is more interested in unfixing, promising that he will give "twoe sheires in *England* next to *Wales*" in perpetuity as Armante's dowry (4.1.23–25), and this is only one of a number of signs of a troubling uncertainty in the concept of Englishness. This is a play in which "French" is a stable term (1.2.30), and Germany too has a securely established national image even if it is only as the home of unreliable clocks: Colchester figures Armante as "a german clock / Never goinge true" (4.3.5–6). Englishness, though, is a different matter. It is clear that it is important:

Colchester. All strangers leaue the roome.

Clowne. Noe english man stirr a foote.

Winchester. Hence with this triviall fellow. (3.1.49–51)

The play is, however, not as confident as Winchester that the Clown's remark is trivial, as we see when the king asks Penda, disguised as Conon, if he is a Saxon, implying that his ethnic identity is not self-evident (1.1.49), and the question is made all the more vexed by a marked emphasis on the

unreliability of historiography. An interest in historiography is signaled early, when Edmund disguises himself as Gildas, a name prominent among early chroniclers, whom Brian Jay Corrigan identifies as the earliest source for Arthur,⁷⁴ and whom Drayton at least had clearly read;⁷⁵ later, the Clown agitates to be made chronicler (4.2.31–35) and Winchester questions him suspiciously:

Winchester. Your cronicle begins with *Brute* the sonne of *Silvius* the sonne of *Astyanax* the sonne of *Æneas* as other cronicles of *England* doe, dost not?

Clowne. *Brute?* noe my lord; thincke you I will make bruite beasts of cuntry men? I weare a swete *Brute* then.
Brutus was noe more heere then I was heere.

Where was *Cassius* when *Brutus* was heere? (5.3.40–46)

It is a fair question; where *was* Dio Cassius, and why *doesn't* he mention Brutus?⁷⁶ This is a speech which suggests that ultimately we cannot really be certain of any aspect of the past, and the play as a whole presents that uncertainty as fundamentally connected to ideas about cuckolds, bastardy, and female frailty. Athelstan, then, is a figure who enables early modern writers to ask fundamental questions about what England is, who should rule it, and on what terms.

NOTES

¹ John Bridges, *A defence of the government established in the Church of Eng-lande for ecclesiasticall matters* (London: John Windet for Thomas Chard, 1587), p. 1359.

² William Allen [Robert Persons], *A conference about the next succession to the crowne of Inghland* (London: R. Doleman, 1595), p. 184.

³ Paul Hill, *The Age of Athelstan: Britain's Forgotten History* [2004] (Stroud: The History Press, 2008), p. 179.

⁴ Hill, *The Age of Athelstan*, pp. 16 and 206.

⁵ Hill, *The Age of Athelstan*, p. 39.

⁶ Hill, *The Age of Athelstan*, pp. 73 and 81.

⁷ William Camden, *Britain*, trans. Philemon Holland (London: F. Kingston, R. Young, and J. Legatt for George Latham, 1637), p. 196.

⁸ Michael Drayton, *Poly-Olbion: A Chorographical description of tracts, riuers, mountains, forests, and other parts of this renowned isle of Great Britain* (London: 1622), p. 108.

⁹ William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, ed. J. M. Nosworthy [1955] (London: Cengage Learning, 2007), 3.1.60–62.

¹⁰ It is sometimes claimed that his father, Edward the Elder, underwent such a ceremony, but Sarah Foot thinks Athelstan, not Edward the Elder, was the first monarch to be crowned at Kingston (Sarah Foot, *Athelstan: The First King of Eng-land* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011], p. 74).

¹¹ Hill, *The Age of Athelstan*, p. 121.

¹² See for instance Foot, *Athelstan*, p. 77.

¹³ Hill, *The Age of Athelstan*, p. 86.

¹⁴ Raphael Holinshed, *The first and second volumes of Chronicles* (London: Henry Denham, 1587), p. 33.

¹⁵ Frank Shenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 347.

¹⁶ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 284.

¹⁷ A. C. Wood, ed., *Mr Harrie Cavendish his Journey to and from Constanti-nople 1589 by Fox, his Servant*, Camden Miscellany vol. 17 (London: Royal His-torical Society, 1940), p. 22.

¹⁸ Camden, *Britain*, p. 174.

¹⁹ Rebecca Brackmann, *The Elizabethan Invention of Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), pp. 96–97.

²⁰ Christopher Brooke, *The Saxon and Norman Kings* [1963] (London: Fon-tana, 1967), pp. 18 and 120.

²¹ Foot, *Athelstan*, pp. 94, 119 and 121.

²² John Chandler, *John Leland's Itinerary: Travels in Tudor England* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1993), pp. 106–7.

²³ Marion M. Archibald, "Cotton's Anglo-Saxon Coins in the Light of the Peiresc Inventory of 1606," *British Numismatic Journal* 76 (2006), pp. 171–203, pp. 176, 181, and 191.

²⁴ Foot, *Athelstan*, pp. 154–55 and 212.

²⁵ Hill, *The Age of Athelstan*, p. 87.

²⁶ Thomas Heywood, *The generall history of women* (London: William Hunt, 1657), pp. 332–33.

²⁷ Foot, *Athelstan*, p. 12.

²⁸ Robert Persons, *A conference about the next succession to the crowne of Ingland* (Antwerp: A. Coninx, 1595), pp. 181–82.

²⁹ William Haughton, *Grim the Collier of Croyden* (London: R. D., 1662), 1.1.11–13.

³⁰ Hill, *The Age of Athelstan*, p. 205.

³¹ Holinshed, *Chronicles*, p. 248.

³² This is quoted by, amongst others, John Selden in *Titles of honor* (London: William Stansby for John Helme, 1614), p. 303.

³³ Hill, *The Age of Athelstan*, p. 105.

³⁴ Robert Dallington, *Aphorismes ciuill and militarie amplified with authorities, and exemplified with historie, out of the first quarterne of Fr. Guicciardine* (London: Richard Field for Edward Blount, 1613), p. 56.

³⁵ Samuel Daniel, *The Collection of the History of England* (London: Nicholas Okes, 1618), p. 12.

³⁶ John Speed, *The theatre of the empire of Great Britaine* (London: William Hall for John Sudbury and George Humble, 1612), p. 364.

³⁷ Hill, *The Age of Athelstan*, p. 206.

³⁸ Hill, *The Age of Athelstan*, p. 207.

³⁹ Shenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 339.

⁴⁰ Camden, *Britain*, pp. 206–7.

⁴¹ Foot, *Athelstan*, pp. 164 and 201.

⁴² See Lisa Hopkins, *Renaissance Drama on the Edge* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014).

⁴³ Lucy Munro suggests that "Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the play's Jacobean context, the play displaces the historical King Athelstan's victories against the Scots onto the Welsh" ("'Nemp your sexes!': Anachronistic Aesthetics in *Hengist, King of Kent* and the Jacobean 'Anglo-Saxon' Play," *Modern Philology* 111.4 (2014), pp. 734–61, p. 755), but the result is a lacuna as much as a compliment.

⁴⁴ Arthur H. Williamson, "Number and national consciousness: The Edinburgh mathematicians and Scottish political culture at the union of the crowns," in *Scots and Britons: Scottish political thought and the union of 1603*, ed. Roger A. Mason (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 187–212, pp. 206 and 153.

⁴⁵ Lisa Hopkins, "Scota, Cleopatra, and Roman Law," in *Antony and Cleopatra: New Critical Essays*, ed. Sara Deats (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 231–42.

⁴⁶ Richard Wilson, *Free Will: Art and Power on Shakespeare's Stage* (Manches-

ter: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 350.

⁴⁷ Hill, *The Age of Athelstan*, p. 114. See also Foot, *Athelstan*, pp. 235–36.

⁴⁸ Rebecca Brackmann, *The Elizabethan Invention of Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), pp.135, 132 and 173.

⁴⁹ David Griffith, “The Visual History of Guy of Warwick,” in *Guy of Warwick: Icon and Ancestor*, ed. Alison Wiggins and Rosalind Field (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), pp. 110–32, p. 111.

⁵⁰ Martha W. Driver, “‘In her owne persone semly and bewteus’: Representing women in stories of Guy of Warwick,” in *Guy of Warwick: Icon and Ancestor*, ed. Alison Wiggins and Rosalind Field (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), pp. 133–53, pp. 145–46. On the prominence of the Guy of Warwick story see Helen Cooper, “Guy of Warwick, Upstart Crows and Mounting Sparrows,” in *Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson: New Directions in Biography*, ed. Takashi Kozuka and J. R. Mulryne (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 119–38, p. 121.

⁵¹ William Shakespeare and John Fletcher, *Henry VIII*, ed. A. R. Humphreys (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 5.4.22.

⁵² Samuel Rowlands, *The famous history of Guy Earle of Warwicke* (London: E. Allde, 1620), 1.26–28.

⁵³ Speed, *The Theatre of the Empire of Great Britain*, p. 365.

⁵⁴ Hill, *The Age of Athelstan*, p. 204.

⁵⁵ Isaac Taylor, *Words and Places* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1925), p. 269.

⁵⁶ Rowlands, *The famous history of Guy Earle of Warwicke*, sig. A4r.

⁵⁷ As I write, there is speculation that part of his pelvis may have been found.

⁵⁸ Foot, *Athelstan*, p. 91.

⁵⁹ Helen Cooper, “Guy as early modern English hero,” in *Guy of Warwick: Icon and Ancestor*, ed. Alison Wiggins and Rosalind Field (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), pp. 185–99, p. 188.

⁶⁰ Hill, *The Age of Athelstan*, p. 206.

⁶¹ Cooper, “Guy as early modern English hero,” p. 189.

⁶² Thomas Dekker, John Ford and William Rowley, *The Welsh Ambassador*, in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. Fredson Bowers, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 4.2.68–71. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.

⁶³ William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Jonathan Bate [1995] (London: Arden, 2003), 1.1.589–88.

⁶⁴ Foot, *Athelstan*, p. 84

⁶⁵ See for instance Hill, *The Age of Athelstan*, p. 127.

⁶⁶ Shenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 355.

⁶⁷ Hill, *The Age of Athelstan*, p. 56.

⁶⁸ Hill, *The Age of Athelstan*, p. 202.

⁶⁹ John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (London: John Day, 1583), pp. 1130 and 1189.

⁷⁰ Camden, *Britain*, p. 213.

⁷¹ Foot, *Athelstan*, p. 43.

⁷² Richard Wilson, “Sermons in Stones: Shakespeare’s Dangerous Thresholds” (unpublished inaugural lecture at Kingston University, 2014).

⁷³ Thomas Dekker, *Old Fortunatus* (London: S. S. for William Apsley, 1600), sigs.. D1r and F3r.

⁷⁴ Brian Jay Corrigan, ed., *The Misfortunes of Arthur: A Critical, Old-Spelling Edition* (New York: Garland, 1992), p. 8.

⁷⁵ Drayton, *Poly-Olbion*, p. 72.

⁷⁶ *Pace* Lucy Munro’s assumption that the Clown is confused and really means Caius Cassius (“Nemp your sexes!” p. 753), Dio Cassius is regularly named in Renaissance texts as one of the earliest authorities on British history.