



From the Romans to the Normans on the English Renaissance Stage

Lisa Hopkins



EARLY DRAMA, ART, AND MUSIC

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Conclusion

AT THE OUTSET OF this book, I posed three questions: what did early modern England know about the pre-Conquest past, where does this knowledge surface in literature, and above all, to what extent did ideas about the past shape concepts of contemporary national, cultural and political identities? To combine the first and second questions, early modern English dramatists knew (or thought they knew) a lot about the period between the Romans to the Normans. In the first chapter, “Bisson Conspectuities’: Language and National Identity,” I traced Renaissance dramatists’ awareness of the fact that the very language in which they wrote their plays spoke of past ethnic conflicts and of the tension between the fantasy of Roman ancestry, with its implied connection to Troy, and the actuality of Germanic and Scandinavian origins. In the second, “Profit and Delight? Magic and the Dreams of a Nation,” I looked at the other major implication of the Roman element of England’s past, the connection to Catholicism and its subsequent loss. Next, in “A Borrowed Blood for Brute’: From Britain to England,” I examined some of the ways in which Renaissance drama considered the inescapable fact of hybridity, and in “Queens and the British History,” “Dido in Denmark: Danes and Saxons on the Early Modern English Stage” and “Valiant Welshwomen” I focused on the role of female ancestors in particular. Finally in “Athelstan, the Virgin King” I showed the range and flexibility of a single figure from the Anglo-Saxon past and how many issues such a figure could be used to speak to.

Collectively, these discussions have pointed up a number of concerns. In the first place, there is the question of the relationship between England and Britain. Britain supposedly took its name from Brutus, great-grandson of Aeneas, and James I was fond of insisting that the fact that England, Scotland, and Wales were a homogenous landmass mandated that they should also be a homogenous political entity. Against these markers of pastness and wholeness, though, other concerns militated. The dialect, place-names, and church dedications of different parts of the country spoke

of different ethnic origins, and even the Brutus story itself had a built-in emphasis on fragmentation in that it stressed the disappearance of the bloodline of Lochrine (and even that of Camber had to be taken largely on trust). As a result, England and Britain sit in uneasy tension in texts of the period, neither coterminous nor complementary, with the added complication that the term “Britain” is associated with the political agenda of James I as well as with the Galfridian narrative of the past. The disconnect between the two terms is not only a threat, though; it also offers an opportunity. In the sense that all narratives of the British/English past are fundamentally dynastic—even in a sense family history—they are essentially predicated not merely on reproduction but on diversification, for families are created not by parthenogenesis but by marriage, and the consequent, constant introduction of new blood. Hybridization is thus inevitable, and the successive waves of invasion by Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Danes, and Normans could seem in one way merely a metaphor for the formation of new families.

It is this stress on miscegenation which accounts in part for the emphasis placed on the role of queens in the formation of British national and political identities (the presence of two successive queens on the throne of England, coupled with the reign of Mary, Queen of Scots over the Border, also had something to do with it, as did the useful coincidence that James I’s wife Anna of Denmark came from one of the nations which had invaded England in the past). Thus not only the obvious figure of Boudicca but also her possible proxy, the unnamed queen of Cymbeline, along with Cordelia, Landgartha, Bertha of the West Saxons, and (in a play now lost) Emma are all important characters, as too are Roxena and Cartesmunda, lovers of Vortigern and Canute respectively; some texts even imagine a wife for the famously celibate Athelstan. Collectively, these women testify to the importance attached to the relationship between marriage and hybridization, but they also bear on the question of who should rule and on what basis: should it be a war leader, a *dux bellorum*, such as was supposedly elected by the Goths, or should heredity play a part, and if so how important were questions of gender, legitimacy (as touched on most notably in *The Welsh Ambassador*) and primogeniture (as raised in *Gorboduc*)? Too delicate to discuss in relationship to contemporary events, questions such as these could be floated with relative safety in texts set in the distant past.

Finally, a recurrent motif in the plays I have discussed is the return of the dead, which is presented as all the more important because we are several times reminded that the Reformation led to the destruction or loss

of many royal or holy bodies and tombs. This is particularly apparent in *Thorney Abbey*, a play which almost systematically tackles a number of the topics I have touched on in this book. Published in 1662 as part of *Gratiae Theatrales, or a choice ternary of English plays*, and attributed there to “T. W.,” *Thorney Abbey* defies either secure ascription or secure dating; in their catalog of *British Drama 1533–1642*, Martin Wiggins and Catherine Richardson offer a best guess of 1615, but give 1610–1642 as the possible limits, and note that though there are vague similarities with the work of both Rowley and Heywood there is nothing to confirm the presence of either.¹ The 1662 Prologue by “Theatro-Philos” declares,

This I’le dare to foretell, although no Sear,
That Thorny-Abbey will outdate King LEAR.²

Although this assessment was to prove wildly over-optimistic, the comparison to Shakespeare is not completely spurious. Not only is the play opened by a fool who discusses the propriety of fools appearing in tragedies, but Sibert, Earl of Coventry, and his wife Emma closely echo Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. The unnamed king comes to stay with them; they decide to kill him and employ two murderers for the purpose; Bishop Lucius (that name again) and the earl of Wiltshire arrive to visit the king and the murder is discovered; Sibert kills the king’s pages and blames the deed on them, remarking the while how shocking it is that this should have happened in his house; countess Emma feels faint. There are repeated thunder and other climatic effects which clearly indicate divine displeasure at the regicide, and which unnerve Sibert so much that he decides to flee to Ireland to escape them. However, the appearance of a blazing star encourages Emma to confess and all is revealed. There are also parallels with other plays about the pre-Conquest past. As in *The Welsh Ambassador*, there is a prince born out of wedlock whose parents subsequently marry, and there are echoes both of that play and of *Henry VIII* when Edmund says to Anne “this rich Ambassador / Discover’d to me more then the Indies wealth” and Anne replies, “Oh! what a jewell then beyond esteem / Have I then lost, which gold can ne’re redeem?” (p. 18). There is an odd echo of *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (and a reminder of the potentially perilous associations of the name Anne) when Edmund assures Anne “then ’tis no snare, / Nor incest can it be, thou art my wife” (p. 19); since she is no relation of his, it could not possibly be incest, so perhaps the suggestion has gravitated in from the incest between King Arthur and his sister Anne.

Most notably, though, the play is about the foundation of Westminster Abbey, the place where the bodies of kings are buried. In fact Edward the Confessor's was the first royal burial in the Abbey, but in *Thorney Abbey* when the body of the unnamed, murdered king is finally discovered his brother and successor Edmund says,

Take up the body, and let it have a second buriall,
And layd within the sepulchers of Kings. (pp. 40–41)

The grave motif is underlined when Thorney actually takes up residence in a tomb, living there all the time he is having the Abbey built and declaring “Here in my grave, I’le live and learn to dye, / That after death my Soul to Heav’n may fly” (p. 43). His second motive is that “since I have no child to keep my fame, / Ile call it Thorny-Abbey by my name” (pp. 44–45)—but of course no one now calls Westminster Abbey by that name, and even the play itself does not trouble to remember the name of the king who will supposedly be the Abbey’s first royal corpse. Even our principal memorial to the past no longer recalls the things it was originally intended to recall, and the story of its foundation is tainted by other, less welcome memories of incest, of regicide, of illegitimacy, and of two of Britain’s most suspect queens, Lady Macbeth and Anne Boleyn (who is also recalled by the fact that the play has an earl of Wiltshire, the title conferred on her father Thomas Boleyn). The principal impression created by *Thorney Abbey* is therefore one of loss of bodies and blurring of memories and names. It is that loss and blurring for which so many of these plays seek a redress, albeit one of the imagination, by bringing back the missing dead. In *Fatum Vortigerni*, Death opens proceedings and later the ghost of King Constantine appears. *The Misfortunes of Arthur* opens with the ghost of Gorlois, and *The Valiant Welshman* with the bard emerging from his tomb. In *Cymbeline* Innogen returns apparently from the dead; in *King Lear* Lear believes that Cordelia does; and in both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* ghosts appear. These hauntings emblemize the way in which the past was felt to bear on the present.

In particular, the knowledge that there had been different constituent parts of Britain in the past bore strongly on the sense that there still were. In *Gorboduc*, *The Misfortunes of Arthur* and *Macbeth*, Scotland is a source of threat and danger; in *The Valiant Welshman*, *Cymbeline*, *A Shoo-maker a Gentleman* and *Henry VIII*, Wales is a site of miracle and of the last hope of reviving a link to the British (and by implication Trojan) past. There is a recurrent acknowledgement that a purely British identity

is no longer possible (if indeed it ever was), because bloodlines have been diluted by wave after wave of invasion, but there is also a sense of a link between land and identity which means that while Britishness may have been constantly modified by new blood, it can also be seen as having been constantly revitalized by it. The idea of a thread of an enduring and distinctive Britishness, inflected by time but not fundamentally altered by it, is sometimes enhanced by topicality and is also bolstered by the plays' collective carelessness with chronology, as in *Fatum Vortigerni* where the characters include Uther Pendragon, Canute, Hengist and Horsa, and a Benedictine monk. As King Arthur rubs shoulders with Hengist and Horsa, Alfred the Great is sought after by the sister of King Canute, and the daughter of King Cymbeline is pursued by a Renaissance Italian nobleman, audiences are offered a vision of an undeniable and indestructible Britishness which even as it changes is still essentially the same.

NOTES

¹ Martin Wiggins and Catherine Richardson, *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue*, vol. 6: 1609–16 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 461.

² Anonymous, *Gratiae Theatrales, or a choice ternary of English plays* (London: R. D., 1662), p. 5.