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Power, Royalty, Style: the Strange Case of Henry VII and Perkin Warbeck

Roberto D'Avascio

This essay offers a close reading of John Ford's *Perkin Warbeck* ("a history play about the end of history plays", Taylor 2008) which re-proposes the (hi)story of a pretender to the throne who challenges the legitimacy of Henry VII in a fully Stuart era. The essay considers issues of dramaturgy and historiography/history on stage, against the backdrop of the passage of English throne from Elizabeth I to James I, which marked an epochal dynastic transition in English history and an overall change in the cultural climate that particularly affected the theatre.

Keywords: John Ford, *Perkin Warbeck*, royal power, legitimacy, English history, historiography

John Ford, in the prologue to *The Chronicle History of Perkin Warbeck*, deliberately announces "Nor is here / Unnecessary mirth forc'd, to endear / A multitude"[1]; thus composing a work that was, curiously, not named after the English monarch Henry VII but after the pretender to the crown, Perkin Warbeck, and yet requires a high dramatic style and a solemn sense of tragedy[2].

Perkin claims to be the last descendant of the House of York, the very same Richard who was second in line to Edward IV, who allegedly escaped the carnage in the Tower of London and is, therefore, the legitimate claimant to the English crown. This play, which bears the curious subtitle *A Strange Truth*, stages Perkin's rapid rise and ru-

1 All quotations of *The Chronicle History of Perkin Warbeck* are taken from *Five Plays*, ed. Ellis 1960.

2 The play was first published in 1634 by Thomas Purfoote Jr. for Hugh Beeston and was staged by The Queen's Majesty's Servants al Phoenix Theatre in London.

inous downfall. The play presents the historical trajectory from 1494 and 1499 – from Perkin's triumphant arrival at the Scottish court of James IV and his marriage to Lady Katherine Gordon, to their subsequent banishment from Scotland to Cornwall and his final execution, which definitively sanctioned Henry VII's victory.

A ghost roams England. The English monarch himself is aware of it. The story opens in Westminster; Henry VII is seated on the throne, consumed with anxiety. He is surrounded by his noble advisers. His turmoil is derived from the presence of spectres which haunt his kingdom and his power: "Still to be haunted, still to be pursued, / Still to be frightened with false apparitions / Of pageant majesty and new-coined greatness" (I.i.1-3). Henry feels he is living under a threat from which he is unable to free himself. He sees himself as a ridiculous "mockery king" (4). While the prologue presented a sense of high-tragedy the King's first appearance anticipates a dramatic style that is drastically lowered.

This is how the monarch denounces his kingship before the court: that of a laughing stock, if not a buffoonish mockery. The spectre that seems to haunt him, hovering over his realm, is perhaps not only that of Perkin Warbeck, but also the eternal fear of returning pretenders to the throne from the House of York. This phantasmal presence haunts not only the security of the state, but Henry's own mind, undermining the fragile balance of a national pacification built around Tudor ideology, as the king feels the need to repeatedly narrate his victorious history. From his throne he publicly claims "our own royal birth right" (9), legitimising his reign over England and describing his royal image as "the best physician" (11), capable of healing England's bleeding wounds with the arms of peace. And yet, he must admit that his political construction around the House of Tudor has not made his state secure, as it remains in constant uncertainty.

Ford's dramaturgy seems to declare that Henry's staged ideological representation of his power produces a non-hegemonic meaning, surrounded by historical ghosts. The court intervenes in support of the king, recalling the terrible War of the Roses – the war that God himself put an end to in recognising the sacred figure of King Henry VII, bearer of peace and justice. The narrative concludes with the tale of the ferocious Richard III, murderer of his nephews (the sons of Edward IV), and the divine justice wrought by the hand of the king

in killing the usurper and crowning his victory through marriage to Elizabeth of York. Although genealogy, birthright, divine right, military victory and the divine intervention of providence seem to overflow in the rhetoric of the court, the ghost of York is ever-present, undermining the legitimacy and kingship of the first Tudor monarch.

In 1674, exactly forty years after the publication of *Perkin Warbeck*, Charles II ordered renovations to the Tower of London. The works uncovered a wooden chest containing the skeletons of two children. The royal surgeon claimed that the remains were those of Edward IV's eldest son – the deposed Edward V – and his youngest son, Richard, Duke of York. Charles II publicly proclaimed the identity of the young princes and had their remains interred in Westminster Abbey, complete with an epigraph which attributed the murder to their supplanting uncle.

Unlike the historical and theatrical anxieties of Henry VII, Charles II had never had to face the danger of pretenders to the throne from the House of York. Still, he was aware of the political utility of exploiting this discovery: the identification of the corpses of Edward and Richard guaranteed continuity and legitimacy to the dynastic line that continued from the Tudors to the Stuarts (Cozza 1995, XLVI).

John Ford's *Perkin Warbeck* re-proposes the (hi)story of a pretender to the throne, who challenges the legitimacy of Henry VII in a fully Stuart era. The passage of the English throne from Elizabeth I to James I marked an epochal dynastic transition in English history, accompanied by an overall change in the cultural climate that particularly affected the theatre. Compared to the previous Tudor era, the axis of relations between theatre, history and the image of the monarchy began to change radically: theatre was still the mirror in which the kingship of power was reflected, but in a troubling way. If, during the ideological regime of the Tudor reign, the histories dialogued with historiographical production[3], then this dramaturgy forged new historical narratives that were "intensely nationalistic in their dedication to the greater glory of England, and deliberately

3 See *Anglica Historia* (1534) by Polydore Vergil, *The Union of the two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and Yorke* (1548) by Edward Hall, *Acts and Monuments or The Book of Martyrs* (1563) by John Foxe, and *Chronicles of England, Scotlande and Irelande* (1577) by Raphael Holinshed.

propagandistic in their use of history to support the right of the Tudors to the throne" (Ribner 1957, 2).

While the Tudor dynasty "threatened from the outside and unstable from within", had found a balance of power "in the imposition of an imperial absolutism" that sustained itself through a "conception of the world that exalted order and conformity" on the one hand, and "corroborated the sacredness of the sovereigns' power" (Ferrara 1994, 10) on the other[4], this perfect symmetry between the image of monarchy, historical writing and history plays seemed to lose its political and aesthetic balance before the image of the new Stuart monarch, James I. This was a moment of profound crisis for a theatrical genre which appeared to be waning[5]. Soon, the history play would decline irreversibly in the face of a historical, cultural and ideological context characterised by the English crown on Scotsman's head, the tarnishing of the nationalist spirit, the rise of private theatres and an aesthetic reformulation of the stage that transformed the same historical subject into a more nuanced *romance*. The historiographic and theatrical production of the 'great men', who had been the driving force behind England's historical events, seemed to be overtaken by a new and different image of kingship, weak and frayed, whose mythologisation seemed too difficult a task for English playwrights. The figures of both James I and Charles I were associated with weak foreign policy, political peace with Spain, betrayal of the Protestant cause, ambiguous sexual tastes in court, the violent assertion of divine right and monarchical absolutism, culminating, finally, in the beheading of Walter Raleigh, paladin of the Tudor epic and its historical kingship.

Therefore, as the theatre displayed fatigue in the stage elaboration of a pragmatic and cautious monarchy, primarily preoccupied with financial matters and completely lacking in heroic and nationalist spirit, John Ford's *Perkin Warbeck* – "a history play about the end of history plays" (Taylor 2008, 396) – was able to interpret this crisis of historical drama. It starts from a radical change in the historiographic paradigm, since "playwrights recognised the inherent ideological dimension of history-writing, recognition which they exploited to

4 My translation.

5 See Barton 1977, 70-1; Leggatt 1986, 129-39; and Woolf 2000.

marvellous effects in their stage plays" (Kamps 1996, 3), unlike a new historiography in which the king became "a figure who is himself subject to historical necessity" (3).

Thus, the figure of the monarch who can no longer produce history and who humanises himself dramatically through the loss of his ideological heroism, is weakened. Such paradigm shifts in historiography are anticipated on the stage. Ford's historical dramaturgy is thus situated in the rift of the representation of a problematic kingship that seems to resolve itself in the exhaustion of its form. An aesthetic decline characterised, as we shall see, by an aesthetic fracture, a stylistic break.

Far from the classicist precepts of Aristotelian unity, Ford constructs an extremely dynamic drama, constantly alternating times, places, characters and points of view. The first act stages the anticipation of protagonist's arrival. Rumours about Perkin Warbeck run amok in a dense montage of scenes between the English court of Henry VII in London and the Scottish court of James IV in Edinburgh. Perkin is not yet on stage, but his presence hovers mysteriously. On the one hand, in the first act, the interpreters of the Tudor ideology try to trap Perkin's ghost in a visible form, which nevertheless remains elusive, aimed at unmasking the pretender's falsehood; on the other hand, this interpretation shows its limits in the second act, when Perkin finally arrives on stage, at James's Scottish court.

This scenic epiphany turns out to be surprising: "However low our expectations of Perkin may be – and in an English audience of the 1630s they would have been indeed – they are confounded by Perkin's actual presence", capable of extinguishing the long-awaited "transparent sham" and presenting "a figure of impressive reality" (Barish 1970, 160). It is the excited Scottish monarch himself who welcomes Perkin in the second act, recognising his kingship through a ceremony of great solemnity. James suddenly transforms himself from king to stage director, concerned with instructing the actors down to the smallest detail before the play begins. If this is the moment in which "majesty encounters majesty" (*Perkin Warbeck*, II.i.40), then he must coordinate all the elements of the performance. Perkin's welcoming ceremony takes the form of a theatrical performance in which the courtiers' gestures must fit into the overall movements of the stage space and conform to the music of the scene.

Martial music plays and Perkin Warbeck, in great pomp, finally appears on stage, surrounded by his entourage. After the formality of greetings, hugs and glances, the music stops, giving way to the host who begins his speech. The monarch/director James constructs a powerful show of royalty, in which the young pretender/actor is perceived in the eyes and minds of the theatre audience as a figure of great nobility. No longer a pretender to the crown, but already a true king: "He must be more than subject who can utter / The language of a king, and such is thine" (103-04).

The staging of this play produces a new image of kingship, characterised by King James' directorial thrust, which, mixing political instance and aesthetic dimension, affirms that any image can be transfigured if placed under the right protection of the skilful manipulation of the visible. We are witnessing the construction of a style. Thanks to James' scenic writing, Perkin can carry out his performance, characterised by poses, gestures and words that reproduce an historical tale already retold too many times, but not yet in an univocal manner[6].

Before the Scottish court, Perkin stages his compelling story, told in noble words and accompanied by melodramatic images laden with pain, suffering, flight and death. Through measured tones of voice, delicate posture, grave and magniloquent words, directing his gaze at the Scottish monarch and his court, Perkin Warbeck achieves an effective performance of royalty.

A dialectical counterpoint between the king and the pretender continues throughout the play. Until, in the finale, Ford stages a direct confrontation between the two rivals. Here, the two are in different positions: the victorious Henry has defeated a stunted Perkin, who occupies a subordinate stage space. Now, the regal actors enact their final performance of the image of the monarchy they represent, and Henry's star seems to be outshone by Perkin's. Perkin Warbeck is led as a prisoner before the king and presented with a strange epithet: "I here present you, royal sir, a shadow / of majesty […] Per-

6 *History of the Reign of King Henry VII* (1622) by Francis Bacon and *The True and Wonderfull History of Perkin Warbeck* (1618) by Thomas Gainsford were the main historical sources, stating Perkin was an impostor. However, Ivo Kamps (1996) suggested Ford could have been influenced by different historical narrations by Polydore Vergil, Edward Hall or George Buc.

kin, the Christian world's strange wonder" (V.ii.32). In seeing, and publicly exhibiting, the spectre which haunted his England, Henry is struck by a concrete stage presence, from which he attempts to defend himself: "We observe no wonder" (37). In this scene Henry becomes highly conscious of his own choked kingship. He denies seeing anything prodigious, but not only does his court perceive the vision of something shining with 'strange' beauty, but Henry himself seems to show great embarrassment in the face of Perkin's 'wonder'. He is acutely aware of the dramaturgical need to establish a difference in the spectators'/subjects' vision of him and of his rival, yet his plot continues to be weak.

Henry denies the vision before them because he cannot see it; he is so blinded by it that the ghost has become a dazzling light. Perkin's tragic portrayal asserts itself theatrically, even without words, and Henry himself must admit, in his blindness, that he perceives something remarkable. Indeed, his eyes cannot bear the sight of that 'wonder', commanding Perkin himself to "turn now thine eyes, / young man, upon thyself and thy past actions" (48-49).

The scene presents a complicated interplay of gazes: Perkin stares fixedly at Henry; Henry, dazzled, orders Perkin to direct his eyes elsewhere; the gaze of the court, which surrounds the scene, notices a kingship in Perkin that Henry desires them to recognise in him; finally, the audience's gaze observes a scene constructed entirely from the exchange of glances, whose drama flows from the clash between differing representations of kingship and style. *Perkin Warbeck* thus stands as the Stuart form of the history play which highlights the paradox of a character who, in order to assert his kingship, culminates in deconstructing the very concept and theatrical genre.

However, if, on the one hand, the play produces a meta-historical drama, on the other hand, it also elaborates a decidedly meta-theatrical reflection, discussing the complex relationships between history and historiography, identity and kingship, status and performance. On stage, an actor plays Perkin, but Perkin himself acts as an actor[7]. Henry tries to unmask the pretence of the pretender, the pretence of the play, and, with it, the pretence of the theatre: "The player's on the stage still, 'tis his part; / He does but act" (V.ii.68-69), but he fails to

7 See Robson 1983, 180-82 and Candido 1980, 306.

grasp the fact that that play can scenically contradict his opinion, proving far more convincing precisely because it is effectively theatrical.

Henry, whose "lack of theatricality is at the heart of the dramatic conflict, so that, if possible, we could say he is theatrically untheatrical" (Taylor 2008, 402), errs in not mirroring himself in Perkin's meta-theatricality, failing to acknowledge his royalty. The phantom evoked in Act I, and the royal body of Act II, eventually becomes light in the final confrontation with a king who is ultimately blinded by it.

Ford's play has a curious subtitle, *A Strange Truth*. In the same way that Henry is unable to decipher the 'strange wonder' that Perkin represents, so too he fails to grasp the 'strange truth' of that theatrical kingship. Just as he fails to stage his historical narrative with a weak and clumsy performance, so he struggles to understand that it is the theatrical dimension of the performance that shapes the historical identity of the character of the monarch. Henry is a terrible actor, unable to learn from Perkin's lessons in acting. Henry once again denounces Perkin's imposture, articulating his historical falsification developed through lessons and rehearsals, which Perkin himself does not deny, but vindicates in a kind of aesthetic statement, oscillating between Aristotelian treatises and Renaissance courtier manuals:

> Truth in her pure simplicity, wants art
> To put a feigned blush on: scorn wears only
> Such fashion as commends to gazers' eyes
> Sad ulcerated novelty, far beneath
> The sphere of majesty: in such a court,
> Wisdom and gravity are proper robes,
> By which the sovereign is best distinguished
> From zanies to his greatness.
> (*Perkin Warbeck,* V.ii.80-87)

Perkin, thus, explains to the audience, the court, and primarily to Henry that, in its simplicity, purity and candour, tragic truth cannot be sufficient to represent itself, on the contrary it needs artifice. His performance as an actor is artifice of truth, it is a truth that has become, indeed, 'strange'. It is, therefore, theatrical artifice that creates the character. If Henry, in his pragmatism, holds Machiavelli as his *maestro*, "Perkin's is Castiglione, whose *Courtier* is recognizably a denizen of the *Prince*'s court" (Neill 1976, 119). The art of the courtier

is, in fact, defined according to theatrical codes. His defining characteristic is *grazia*, a gift of nature developed through study and discipline, just like the player's art. Henry discerns only the simulation of kingship elaborated by Perkin "so, / the lesson prompted and well conned, was moulded / into familiar dialogue, oft rehearsed, / till, learnt by heart, 'tis now received for truth" (*Perkin Warbeck*, V.ii.76-79) – losing sight of the 'wisdom and gravity' which define the greatness of a king. Such characteristics are attainable through that artifice represented by the actor's performance, which "cultivate[s] an artificial following of nature, always taking care, however, to conceal his artifice with an appearance of negligent ease" (Neill 1976, 119-20). Such performance – "a simultaneous appreciation of the delicate artifice which improves on nature, and of the further artifice which is used to conceal the first" (119-20) is based on a concept of *grazia* that cannot be separated from that of *sprezzatura* (Castiglione 2007)[8]. Perkin represents this nonchalance, whereby his identity "*becomes* his style" (120), showing the continuous transition between *kingship* and *(ma)king-ship*.

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8 As is well known, the first English translation, by Thomas Hoby in 1561, deeply influenced aristocratic culture in the Elizabethan period.

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