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Strange truths: the Stanleys of Derby on the English Renaissance stage

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Strange Truths:

the Stanleys of Derby on the English Renaissance Stage

It is a truism to say that English history plays concentrate on kings. But, like most other truisms, it is only partly true. In this paper I want to concentrate on the ways in which a number of English history plays represent the history of a dynasty which never ascended the English throne - the Stanleys, who with their Tudor blood and kingship of the Island of Man, seem often to be seen almost as alternative kings, a rôle that was indeed contemplated for perhaps their most famous representative, Ferdinando Stanley, Lord Strange, and subsequently 5th Earl of Derby. My title comes from John Ford's late history play *Perkin Warbeck*, whose full title is *The Chronicle Historie of Perkin Warbeck: A Strange Truth*, but it will be my contention that a number of other plays tell Strange truths. Moroever, Lord Strange is not the only member of the family who finds himself represented or alluded to on the English stage: I will also be considering various Earls of Derby, at least one Sir Edward Stanley, and two separate bearers of the name Sir William Stanley. Since '[t]he view of the torturer Topcliffe, voiced in 1592, was that "all the Stanleys in England are traitors"',[1] these plays, taken together, offer an alternative, sometimes dangerous, sometimes delicate, and sometimes scurrilous counter-history of England which seems deliberately to position itself in opposition to the official truth.

It is not surprising that the emphasis should be on danger, because celebrated and important though the Earls of Derby were, much of their fame was overshadowed by the notoriety of a quite different member of the family, Sir William Stanley, an officer in the

English army in the Low Countries who in 1587 betrayed the English-held city of Deventer to the Spanish, but denied that his actions were treacherous because he said he had had permission from Leicester to use his discretion as to whether it was possible to hold the city. Nor was this the end of Sir William's adventures: in 1591 he proposed to Philip of Spain that he should seize the Channel Island of Alderney. Its 'lord', Thomas Chamberlain, was willing to hand it over, Stanley said, and his brother Captain Edward Stanley was ready to occupy it with 200 men.[2] Stanley further tried to resurrect the idea in 1598 and 1599. He also had a more straightforward plan of invasion, this time involving the Derby family. To quote Ethel Seaton:

> By 1592, Stanley's plans of attack were maturing: sixteen ships were to invade England in April "near Stanley's own country, where a great personage would be ready to help and take part with him, whose name was set down by the figure 19 (Earl of Derby), and (Lord Strange), a young one who he hoped would be ready to assist, by that of 14."... The curious fact that neither Derby nor Strange was even secretly a Roman Catholic was no deterrent to the volatile Stanley, who evidently felt sure that they would be of the same mind as Henri IV.[3]

Seaton refers of course to Henri IV of France, but the title is one suggestive of wider applicability, for it was also that of the first Lancastrian king. The coincidence may perhaps encourage us to pay particular attention to the obsessive repetition in Shakespeare's *Richard II* of Henry's full range of titles - Henry of Hereford, Lancaster and Derby - and it may be worth remembering this when we turn later to *Perkin Warbeck*, which is obviously indebted to *Richard II*, and which also floats the possibility that the succession to the Crown of England might move in unexpected directions.

I will come back to Sir William Stanley in due course, but I want first to turn to another member of the Stanley family, who may perhaps have been an influence on the representation of history in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*. There does seem to be a definite connection between Marlowe and the Stanleys: quite apart from the problematic question of Marlowe's possible relationship with Lord Strange, to which I will return, John Poole, who Charles Nicholl suggests was the man who taught Marlowe how to counterfeit money, was the brother-in-law of the sixteenth-century Sir William Stanley, the betrayer of Deventer. I think this spills over into *The Jew of Malta*, and inflects its representation of historical events. I have argued elsewhere that Marlowe's representation of the island of Malta is more accurate than is often appreciated.[4] In particular, Marlowe may well, as Emily Bartels suggested some years ago, have known better than his editors when he implied considerable tension between the Knights of St John and the Spanish, who go so far as to threaten them with expulsion.[5] One Spaniard in particular, Don Garcia de Toledo, viceroy of Sicily, was a special bugbear of the Knights, most notably during the Siege of 1565. Since the Maltese islands had been the gift of Spain, and since Don Garcia's own territory of Sicily would be so directly threatened if Malta was lost, the Knights looked repeatedly to him for support, but the help he provided was minimal. He hedged around every offer of assistance with impossible conditions, and when he finally allowed the small relief force known as the Piccolo Siccorso (the 'Small Succour') to leave Sicily it was only with express orders that it was not to land unless the crucial fort of St Elmo were still in the Knights' hands; if it were not, they were to be abandoned to

their fate. He did, however, leave his son, Frederic, as a pledge of his goodwill; the boy fought gallantly and was eventually killed in action during the Siege.

There are, I think, a number of suggestive parallels between these events and Marlowe's play. The stark contrast between the heroism of young Frederic and the dilatoriness of his father may well seem quite closely analogous to the distance which separates the loving commitment of Abigail, dying alongside the nuns in the community which her father has destroyed, and Barabas' opportunism. The latter is a quality Barabas also shares with Don Garcia de Toledo, who, despite the pitifully small part he had played in events, was not slow to be publicly associated with the Grand Master after the Turks' eventual withdrawal. Don Garcia arrived on the island with the final Sicilian relief force, and shared in a celebration banquet. Since provisions were naturally scarce, however, he brought his own food to it.[6] Again there is a parallel here with *The Jew of Malta*, this time with the rather unexpected reaction of Calymath to Barabas' invitation to a similar occasion:

> To banquet with him in his citadel?
> I fear me, messenger, to feast my train
> Within a town of war so lately pillaged,
> Will be too costly and too troublesome
>
> (V.iii.20-3)

This seems an odd detail to include; but it, like the mining of the monastery, does offer a very close echo of the events of the later part of the Siege, after the theatre of war moved from St Elmo to Birgu. And perhaps there is a reason for the closeness of the echo.

In order to understand what that reason might have been, it is necessary to grasp the strategic importance of Fort St Elmo to the Siege. The Knights' headquarters, Fort St Angelo, was based in the town of Birgu, well inside what is now the Grand Harbour of Valletta. However, access to the harbour was entirely controlled by the much smaller Fort St Elmo, situated at its mouth. Consequently the Turks could not even begin the attack on Fort St Angelo until they had first subdued Fort St Elmo. The Turkish admiral Dragut expected to be able to do so within five days; instead, it resisted for almost a month, until every man in it had been slaughtered (and the bodies, in most cases, mutilated and sent downstream to St Angelo with their hearts cut out). The unexpected success of Fort St Elmo's defence turned the tide of the Siege and the Turks eventually sailed away unsuccessful.

It was shortly after the Fall of St Elmo that the Chevalier Robles brought the Piccolo Siccorso to the aid of his beleaguered brethren in June, 1565, and there were two Englishmen with the force. One of them, Sir Edward Stanley, is almost certainly identifiable as the uncle of Ferdinando Stanley, Lord Strange - by whose acting company *The Jew of Malta* was performed. This Sir Edward Stanley had been implicated in a plot in 1571 to rescue Mary, Queen of Scots and take her to the Isle of Man, and was 'listed as a recusant and a "dangerous person" in 1592'.[7] The Piccolo Siccorso arrived on the island at a crucial stage in the siege, immediately after the fall of Fort St Elmo. The loss of St Elmo triggered a complete change in the strategic situation and the conduct of the siege, which was now directed entirely at the peninsula towns of Senglea and Birgu and

at Fort St Angelo, which are all on the other side of Grand Harbour. The Piccolo Siccorso was, as remarked above, transported in Sicilian galleys which actually had orders not to land if Fort St Elmo was not still in Maltese hands, since possession of it was considered so vital that the island was to be written off as lost if it was gone; but the Knight of St John who was sent ashore to learn the situation lied to the Sicilian commander, and the force was landed anyway. In fact, Turkish brutality to the captured defenders of St Elmo had been so monstrous that the loss of the fort had, if anything, stiffened the backbone of Maltese resistance; determined to avenge their dead brethren, and heartened by the fact that this, their smallest fortress, had put up so lengthy a resistance (which had bought time for strengthening the fortifications of Senglea, Birgu and St Angelo), the Knights were grimly resolved to defend their position to the last man, and the indigenous Maltese gave them complete support.

Sir Edward Stanley, then, arrived on Malta at a vital turning-point of the Siege. Spared the lingering horrors suffered by the indomitable defenders of St Elmo, spared too the discussions attendant on the Grand Master's agonised decision to leave them to their fate, spared the sight of the decapitated bodies, their hearts gouged out of their chests, which the current wafted across to St Angelo, Sir Edward served not in the living hell of the tiny, ruined fort but in a large, well-supplied garrison fired by furious determination and, thanks to the length of the resistance offered by St Elmo, a reasonable chance of survival, which improved significantly with every extra day they could hold out. It would probably not have been easy for even Marlowe to be wholly cynical about the defence of Fort St Elmo, but the rest of the Siege was indeed much more as Marlowe depicts it, with

the Knights no longer in serious danger and politicking more to the fore than heroism. When the Turks finally did abandon the Siege in September, two and a half months after he arrived, Sir Edward also witnessed the withdrawal of their humiliated army, in poor morale and devastated by the loss of some of their ablest commanders, and the ensuing jubilation and thanksgiving of the Knights, the Maltese, and the Sicilians who had brought the final relief force. Since Sir Edward did not die until 1609, he would presumably have been well able to give evidence of his experiences.

When Marlowe wrote his play, then, he did so in the service of a patron whose own immediate family had almost certainly had significant experience of both the island of Malta in general and the Great Siege in particular. I have dwelt at some length on the probable experiences of Sir Edward Stanley because they seem to me to overlap in some significant respects with Marlowe's dramatisations of the siege, which, intriguingly, is represented in greater particularity towards its closing stages - precisely those which Sir Edward witnessed. Beyond any specific correspondences, however, is that *The Jew of Malta* is in many ways typical of what might be loosely classified as the Stanley view of history in insisting on the idea that behind the official version of events, which is presented as hypocritical and self-serving, there is a much darker and truer unofficial one. This idea that things might not always be what they seem, or what they are said to be in official accounts, is something which will also be found in *Richard III* and *Perkin Warbeck*.

Just as I suspect *The Jew of Malta* reflects a congruence between Marlowe and the Stanleys, so I wonder if it may be possible to trace the break-up of that relationship, because I think *Edward II* reflects rather less favourably on the Stanleys, and specifically on Lord Strange himself. Much is made in the play of the fact that Edward creates Gaveston 'King and Lord of Man' (I.1.155). Actually Gaveston was merely given the lordship of the island, and was never its king, but the title King of Man was in fact held by the Earls of Derby, and would in the course of time fall to Lord Strange. It therefore seems to me particularly interesting that the character in the play who is unhistorically made to share this title, Gaveston, dies at the hands of the earl of Pembroke's men. The primary resonance here is of course that by the time of *Edward II* Marlowe – or so Kyd appears to hint – seems to have fallen out with Strange, and switched theatre troupe to Pembroke's Men, so this might look like revenge. In the context of this apparent quarrel, it might also be tempting to look again at Nashe's reference to Ferdinando after his death as 'Jove's Eagle-born Ganimed'.[8] The Stanley badge was an eagle and child, but to link it with this particular child obviously does considerable ideological damage.

If Marlowe is indeed reflecting on the Stanley family, however, he is doing so only delicately. When we turn to Shakespeare's *Richard III*, it may look as if the Stanley family is much more openly represented, but actually I want to argue that much of what is being suggested about them is in fact being presented covertly, and that here too there is a tension between official and unofficial versions of history. What I am particularly interested in is the ways in which Shakespeare's telling of this story fits into a clutch of other sixteenth-century renderings of the relevant events, particularly those sponsored or

authored by the Stanleys - of which there are so many that one might indeed speak of a sustained propaganda drive by the Stanleys and their agents to maximise their own importance in English history. The Stanleys were always acutely aware of the importance of disseminating information - in 1588 Henry, 4th Earl of Derby, presided over the destruction of the Marprelate press in Manchester - and it is therefore unsurprising to find several anonymous ballads celebrating the way in which they won the battle of Flodden single-handed, and a northern-authored account of their decisive intervention at the battle of Bosworth, which survives in both an early prose version and a later ballad one. (In real life, the Stanleys hung back at Bosworth; in *Bosworth Feilde*, this becomes masterly inactivity, and the sole factor ensuring the victory of Richmond.) Most notably, there is 'The Stanley Poem', which was written in about 1560 by another Thomas Stanley, Bishop of Man. This is a naïvely charming poem with a number of splendid vocabulary items: I am particularly fond of its dismissal of one group of soldiers as not worth a 'dickeduckefarte' (Fitte Three, l. 208). It also glorifies the Stanleys in a number of ways. In the first place, they are invincible warriors, who not only won the Battles of Flodden and Bosworth Field but also conquered the crucial frontier town of Berwick:

> Thus Barwicke became Englishe by therle Standelay,
> There is no true man that therto dare say nay;
> A thousand four hundred lxxij. no doubt
> Barwicke was made Englishe, or neere thereaboute.
>
> (Fitte Three, 447-450)

Bishop Thomas is in some doubt here about the date, but he is quite sure who won the battle. Secondly, the Stanleys are irresistibly attractive to women, particularly in the case of Thomas, 1st Earl of Derby:

> Then he came in favour with Lady Margaret,
>
> That was doghter to the Duke of Somerset,
>
> And King Henry the Seaventh she was his mother,
>
> She would have Lord Standley, she would have none other
>
> (Fitte Three, ll. 89-92)

'The Stanley Poem' also refers to Henry VII's admiration of Lathom House, which he visited in 1495, five months after his execution of Sir William Stanley - on which occasion, Stanley legend has it, the king leaned over the roof to admire the view, and the household jester whispered in the ear of Earl Thomas, Sir William Stanley's brother, 'Tom, remember Will!'.[9] There is, not surprisingly, none of this in 'The Stanley Poem', but it does record proudly - and entirely erroneously - that Henry was so impressed that 'his haule at Richmond he pulld downe all, / To make it up againe after Latham hall' (Fitte Three, ll. 863-4). (In fact, Henry's decision to rebuild Richmond Palace was prompted by the disastrous fire of 23 December 1497).

Particularly notable are two specific references in Bishop Thomas's account of Stanley history. In the first place, he claims that the King gave the heir of John Stanley the manors of 'Winge, Trynge, and Iving, in Buckinghamshire' (Fitte Two, l. 47). These three manors had acquired considerable symbolic importance because of a legend associated with their transfer. In the fourteenth century, the then lord of the three manors,

Lord Hampden, is said to have slapped the Black Prince in a dispute about chivalry, and Edward III therefore seized these three manors, as recorded in the jingle

> Tring, Wing, and Ivinghoe,
>
> Hampden did foregoe,
>
> For striking of a blow,
>
> And glad he did escape so.

It was to recall this rhyme that Sir Walter Scott would later name his most famous hero Ivanhoe, deliberately alluding to Lord Hampden's refusal to accept what he saw as royal tyranny, and I think the mention of the three may well be performing something of a similar function in 'The Stanley Poem': it memorialises and asserts aristocratic independence from the crown. This is even more the case with the second reference in 'The Stanley Poem' on which I want to pick up, which in this case departs entirely from other accounts:

> Then therle of Darby without taking more reade,
>
> Straighte set the crowne on King Harry the Seaventh his heade.
>
> Sir William Standleyes tongue was somewhat to ryfe,
>
> For a fonde worde he spake soone after he lost his lyfe,
>
> Said, set it thine owne head, for nowe thou maye.
>
> King Henry afterwarde hard tell of that saye:
>
> In such cause it is not meete with princes to boorde,
>
> Good service may be soone loste with a fonde woorde.
>
> (Fitte Three, ll. 529-36)

The usual version of these events, as we shall see when we come to Ford's *Perkin Warbeck*, is that it was the impostor Perkin Warbeck whom Sir William was proposing to set on the throne; here it is his own brother, reinforcing the dangerous suggestion that the Stanleys in effect constitute an alternative royal family.

But it was not only in poetry that the Stanleys were involved; they took a keen interest in drama too. Thomas, 2nd earl, had been a patron of the Chester players, and both the subsequent earls maintained the interest.[10] William the sixth earl was even said to write plays himself at his home in Chester: 'two extant letters dated June 1599 speak of him "busy penning commedies for the common players', and in a later undated letter Lady Derby aked Robert Cecil to look with favour on Derby's Men, "for that my Lord taking delite in them, it will kepe him from moer prodigall courses"'. Earl William may also have been responsible for encouraging the erection of a playhouse in Prescot, near Knowsley.[11] Most notably, of course, there is the suggestion that either Earl William or his brother, Ferdinando the 5th earl, might in some way have been involved with Shakespeare (or occasionally that Earl William *was* Shakespeare, but that idea need not detain us here). E. A. J. Honigmann, for instance, thinks Shakespeare 'was one of Strange's Men before 1594' and that *Richard III*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Henry VI* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* all bear the marks of the connection. He argues that 'Thomas Stanley, the first Earl of Derby, who established the family's fortunes, figures in *Richard III*...and Shakespeare rearranged history so as to make Stanley's services to the incoming Tudor dynasty seem more momentous than they really were', and that something similar

is at work in *Henry VI*, where Queen Margaret rather than Lord Clifford, as in Hall, is blamed for the cruel killing of Rutland:

> Lord Strange was the son of Margaret Clifford, and was therefore a direct descendant of the Cliffords represented in *Henry VI*; also...Ferdinando's "Stanley" ancestors had not yet risen to prominence in the reign of Henry VI - if Lord Strange was to have the pleasure of identifying himself with any of the principal figures in Shakespeare's version of history it had to be through his mother's family. [12]

Honigmann is also prepared to entertain Dugdale's ascription of the epitaphs of Sir Edward Stanley of Winwick and Tong and his father Sir Thomas to Shakespeare.[13]

Of particular interest for *Richard III*, though, is the relationship between the play and the ballad known as 'The Song of the Ladye Bessiye', which purports to tell the story of the events surrounding the Battle of Bosworth from the perspective of Edward IV's eldest daughter Elizabeth of York, who subsequently married Henry VII, and was probably written by Humphrey Brereton, who actually appears as a character in the narrative. This work is clearly part of Stanley propaganda: Lady Bessy speaks to the Earl of Derby of how

> Sir william Stanley, thy brother deere
>
> in the hol[t]e where he doth lye,
>
> he may make 500 fightinge men
>
> by the marryage of his faire Ladye.
>
> (IV, 65-68)

She also mentions George, Lord Strange, Edward and James Stanley, two other Stanleys, and a nephew, Sir John Savage, and the familiar themes of Stanley reliability in battle and good relations with women are thoroughly worked over. There are, however, two rather more unusual emphases. In the first place, 'The Song of the Ladye Bessiye' is remarkable for the considerable stress it lays on Lady Bessy's literacy. The first thing we are told about her is that 'shee cold write, & shee cold reede, / well shee cold worke by prophesye',[14] and her literacy is also the first piece of information about her given to her prospective husband, when Humphrey Bretton tells him:

> "shee is a Countesse, a Kings daughter,
>
> the name of her is **Bessye**,
>
> a louelye Lady to looke vpon,
>
> & well shee can worke by profecye.
>
> (IV, 721-4)

She reads 'how shee shold bee Queene of England, / but many a guiltelesse man first must dye' (I, 167-8) in a book which, she declares, her father left her (I, 52) - suggesting that it has proper patriarchal endorsement, but further suggesting, of course, that it in some sense needs it, as if reading - particularly of a book of prophecy - is a questionable activity for a well-born young lady.

And so indeed it was, or at least for this young lady in particular, because to stress the literacy of Elizabeth of York might come close to glancing in the direction of something rather dangerous, which was the allegation made by Sir George Buc in his *History of Richard III* that Elizabeth of York exercised her literacy to quite different effect, by

writing a letter not to Lord Stanley but to the Duke of Norfolk, expressing her desire to marry Richard III. In Buck's words,

> the Lady Elizabeth, being more impatient and jealous of the success than every one knew or conceived, writes a letter to the Duke of Norfolk, intimating first, that he was the man in whom she most affied, in respect of the love her father had ever bore him, & c. Then she congratulates his many courtesies, in continuance of which, she desires him to be a mediator for her to the King, in continuance of which, in behalf of the marriage propounded between them, who, as she wrote, was her only joy and maker in this world, and that she was his in heart and thought; with all insinuating, that the better part of February was past, and that she feared the Queen would never die.
>
> All of these be her own words, written with her own hand, and this is the sum of her letter, which remains in the autograph, or original draft, under her own hand, in the magnificent cabinet of Thomas Earl of Arundel and Surrey.[15]

Given the circulation of this wildly contentious allegation and the two diametrically opposed versions of the conduct of Elizabeth of York, it is perhaps easier to account for Shakespeare's circumspect decision to exclude her altogether from the play, and for the ambiguity which surrounds the behaviour of Elizabeth Woodville, whom the play does its best, in difficult circumstances, to exculpate.

Also interesting for the same reason is the contrast between the repeated mention of Lord Strange in 'The Song of the Ladye Bessiye', and the absolute silence on the subject in Shakespeare's play. First we are told in the poem that

> King Richard made a messenger,
>
> & send into the west countrye,
>
> "bidd the Erle of Derbye make him readye
>
> & bring 20000 men vnto mee,
>
> "or the Lord stranges head I shall him send.
>
> (V, 861-5)

The name 'Lord Strange' recurs twice more, the second time in conjunction with a reference to his wife and eldest son (V, 881-2 and VI, 977-86). 'Georg L*ord* Strang sonn & heire to Tho*mas* L*ord* Stanley' is also identified in the margin of Sir William Cornwallis' *Encomium of Richard III*, of which one surviving copy may perhaps have been annotated by Shakespare's patron Southampton,[16] while 'The Stanley Poem' not only refers repeatedly to George Stanley as Lord Strange but also adds the detail that 'The lord Straung to be headded was brought out twise' (Fitte Three, l. 523). Shakespeare, however, never calls George Stanley Lord Strange, even though 'Strange' was a name often played with because of the obvious possibilities for punning and rhyming - Strange was for instance often rhymed with change, not least because Ferdinando's motto was *Sans changer ma verité,*[17] and 'The Stanley Poem' refers to the alleged origin of the eagle and child myth as 'the like so straunge a thing a thing hath not beene seene' - (Second Fitte, l. 11). *Richard III* is, indeed, virtually the only Shakespeare

play where the word ‘strange’ never occurs at all, and this may well have been because it would have embarrassed the Stanley family to mention that name in connection with the succession to the Crown and the replacement of one dynasty by another.

When we turn to John Ford’s *Perkin Warbeck*, we revisit both the material of *Richard III* and the text of *The Jew of Malta*, since Marlowe’s play was printed for the first time in 1633, the probable year of *Perkin Warbeck*’s composition. Moreover, not only was it both revived and published by Ford’s friend Heywood, but it contains lines which sound rather more like Ford than like Marlowe:

> Then take them up, and let them be interred
> Within one sacred monument of stone;
> Upon which altar I will offer up
> My daily sacrifice of sighs and tears
>
> (III.ii.29-32)

These are phrases of which Ford is fond - there are close, though not exact, variations on them in his play *Love’s Sacrifice*, which was also going through the press that year - and I would not be at all surprised if there were some form of contamination or revision at work here in which Ford was involved. On the criteria newly legitimated by Gilles Monsarrat in his re-assignation of the ‘Elegy for William Peter’, which stress the importance of repeated or parallel constructions and phrases, I would certainly be tempted to ascribe these lines to Ford. Since Ford also seems to refer to Marlowe in *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*, I think we are at least dealing with a conscious revisiting of the Marlovian aesthetic as well as of the Shakespearean one.

The full title of *Perkin Warbeck* is, as I have already mentioned, *The Chronicle Historie of Perkin Warbeck: A Strange Truth*. Both the truth and the strangeness of it are usually taken to refer to Perkin Warbeck himself, but I want to argue that the play also encodes a rather different sort of strange truth. The unfolding of the main plot of the play is at various points conspicuously delayed and indeed at times almost derailed by an emphasis on the relatively unconnected story of Sir William Stanley, brother of Thomas, Earl of Derby and the trusted friend and advisor of Henry VII, and the revelation of the fact that he has been plotting against the king. In act one, scene three, Sir William Stanley is named (in full) six times in thirty lines, and there is also a striking episode where he makes the sign of the cross on the face of Clifford, the man who has revealed his treachery (II.ii.84 s.d.). Although it is clear that Clifford is telling the truth, he is made to seem here almost more of a traitor than the man whose treachery he unmasks.

I wonder whether one reason for this insistence on the repetition of the name 'Sir William Stanley' is that the story of the fifteenth-century Sir William Stanley of the play is meant to recall that other, sixteenth-century Sir William Stanley, who in 1587 had betrayed Deventer to the Spanish, and who died in Ghent on 3 March 1630, four years before the first publication of Ford's play. Several clues seem to me to point in this direction. In 1584 the sixteenth-century Sir William Stanley had been made sheriff of Cork; much stress is laid on the fact that one of the comic characters in *Perkin Warbeck* is a former mayor of Cork, and indeed the structure of the play is such that John a Water, the ex-mayor in question, could readily double the play's William Stanley. Moreover, at a

number of points in *Perkin Warbeck*, there is reference to the Low Countries, which were the setting for the sixteenth-century Sir William Stanley's treason. The Spanish ambassador Hialas declares that

> *Hialas*. France, Spain and Germany combine a league
> Of amity with England; nothing wants
> For settling peace through Christendom but love
> Between the British monarchs, James and Henry.
> *Durham*. The English merchants, sir, have been receiv'd
> With general procession into Antwerp;
> The emperor confirms the combination.
>
> (IV.iii.1-7)

Here, as with the numerous references to the Duchess of Burgundy, the Low Countries context is insisted on.

There is also another notable connection with the Stanleys which I think impacts on the meanings of *Perkin Warbeck*. The sixteenth-century Sir William Stanley married Elizabeth, daughter of John Egerton of Egerton; the Egerton family was that for which *Comus* was written, and there appear to be references to the Castlehaven affair in both *Perkin Warbeck* and *Comus*.[18] In 1631 the Earl of Castlehaven was found guilty of sodomising one of his servants, for physically assisting another servant to bugger the Countess, and for pandering his daughter-in-law to yet another servant;[19] *Comus*, it has been suggested, with its insistence on the sexual purity of its participants, was a conscious attempt to improve the reputation of the family, vicariously tainted by

association with their notorious relative. I have previously suggested a similar context for *Perkin Warbeck*, since the full name of the renegade peer was Mervyn Touchet, Lord Audley, Earl of Castlehaven, and an earlier bearer of that title, James Touchet, Lord Audley, is prominently featured in *Perkin Warbeck* as one of the principal leaders of the Cornish revolt.[20] He is mentioned by name four times, and the final occasion is one that seems virtually designed to bring to mind the recent, even more opprobrious, disgrace of another bearer of the Audley title:

Let false Audley

Be drawn upon an hurdle from the Newgate

To Tower-hill in his own coat of arms

Painted on paper, with the arms revers'd,

Defac'd and torn; there let him lose his head.

(III.i.94-8)[21]

This possible allusion to the Castlehaven affair in *Perkin Warbeck* takes on a sharp resonance because of a very odd historical fact. In 'The Stanley Poem', Bishop Thomas Stanley begins his history of the family with some startling information:

I intend with true report to praise

The valiaunte actes of the stoute Standelais;

From whence they came, and how they came to that name,

I shall plainely and truly declare the same.

Theire names be Awdeley by very right dissent,

I shall shewe you how, if you geeve good attente,

As quickly as I can, without more delay,

How the name was changed and called Stanley.

In antique tyme much more then two hundred yeare

Was on L. Audley, by stories does appeare,

Audley by creation and by name Audley,

Havinge a lordshippe is yeat called Standley,

Which lordship he gave to his second sonne,

For valiaunte actes that he before had donne.

There this young man dwelling many a longe daye,

And many yeares called Awdley of Standelay,

After he maried the heyre of Sturton;

And when Sturton died thether he went to wonne,

And as in length of tyme thinges be lost and wonne,

All the countrey called him Standley of Sturtonn

(First Fitte, ll. 1-20)

This Audley of Stanley then married 'the daughter and heyre of Hooton' (First Fitte, ll. 23-5), acceding to the title later held by the traitor of Deventer. Of course at the time when Bishop Thomas wrote this there was no reason for anyone to shrink from association with the Audleys, but the Castlehaven scandal entirely altered the situation. By the time Ford was writing, therefore, his incrimination of the Audleys and semi-exculpation of Sir William Stanley could well have been a useful tactic for putting

distance between the Stanleys and the now-undesirable Audleys with whom they had so unfortunately claimed identity.

The 'strange truth' of *Perkin Warbeck*, therefore, seems to me to be twofold. Firstly, it offers an exculpation of the Stanleys in general, and, secondly, it provides a palliation of an event which it presents as analogous to Sir William Stanley's betrayal and his subsequent plot to secure the succession of his cousin, Lord Strange. Perhaps the point is that Perkin is a lost king, as English Catholics thought Strange was - an attractive but doomed alternative ruler. Perhaps, indeed, we are meant to ask who the true king should be.

More widely, though, I think we are also meant to ask how kings in general should behave. There seems to have been something of a precedent for using the figure of the fifteenth-century Sir William Stanley to question the justice of more recent kings. He is, for instance, mentioned in William Warner's *Albion's England*, where we read that

> *Perken* was hang'd, and hang may such: but that the Earle should die
> Some thought hard law, saue that it stood with present pollicie.
> Sir *William Stanley* dide for this (oft King law is doe thus)
> Deseruing better of the King: but what is that to vs?[22]

Sir William Stanley occurs too in Thomas Gainsford's 'The true and wonderful History of *Perkin Warbeck*, proclaiming himself *Richard the Fourth*', where we are told that

> Sir William Stanley swore and affirmed, that he would never fight nor bear Armour against the young Man *Peter Warbeck*, if he knew of a Truth that he was

> the undoubted Son of *Edward the Fourth*, whereupon arose a conjectural Proof, that he had no Good-will to King *Henry*.[23]

Epistemological certainty is initially evoked here only to disappear like smoke: we go from the absolutes of 'swore and affirmed' to the doubt implicit in 'if he knew of a truth', and ultimately to the darkly uncertain 'whereupon arose a conjectural Proof'. The progression is markedly from apparent knowledge to avowed ignorance, and yet it is also clear that, terrifyingly, the more exiguous the evidence, the more extreme is the action taken on the basis of it. On the basis of the 'conjectural Proof', Sir William Stanley will lose his head.

Gainsford's clever rhetoric here makes it clear that he regards the category of treason as a highly dubious one, and there are many other instances of this during the course of his long 'History'. Also à propos of Sir William Stanley, he says that

> The Searcher of Hearts was weary of his Humours and Ingratitude, and so took the King's Cause in Hand, and upon good Inforcement thrust him into the House of Destruction. Otherwise he could not choose but remember, how, not twenty Years before, the Law had interpreted the profuse and lavish Speeches of a Grocer, named *Walker*, dwelling at the Sign of the *Crown*, in *Cheapside*, who bad his Son learn a pace and he would make him Heir of the *Crown*, meaning his House he dwelt in, for which he was adjudged to die...Thus you see there is no Jesting with Princes. (p. 523)

You do indeed - but you also see that this might well be because not all princes are fit to rule or judge.

The suitability of specific princes is, of course, the matter that lies at the nub of the Stanley-oriented counter-history at which I have tried to gesture here. In particular, it is hard to forget in any account of the Perkin story that if Perkin *were* the king, the treason would, in a kind of world upside down motif, be the other way about: the name of traitor would, inevitably, be the name due not to those who follow Perkin but of those who fight against him. This is made clear in Ford's *Perkin Warbeck* when Durham says that Sir William Stanley believes that York's title is better than that of Lancaster:

> Which, if it be not treason in the highest,
> Then we are traitors all, perjured and false,
> Who have took oath to Henry and the justice
> Of Henry's title.[24]

Here, treason takes on an eerie reversibility, reminiscent of the inverse proportions of proof and punishment in Gainsford: either the traitor must be proved wrong - and, implicitly, punished accordingly - or, hideously, we find ourselves in a world in which *everyone else* is a traitor. Although the fact is never mentioned outright, it is clear that Ford's play is haunted by the possible alternative title of *Richard the Fourth* - and that would give rise to a very different view of history in which all polarities of loyalty and sedition would be exactly reversed. It also, of course, raises the whole idea of history a contingent rather than an inevitable force, a tactic which had often been espoused by discontented groups - as with the Tacitean approach favoured by the Earl of Essex's circle - and used to question royalist politics. Eight years after Ford's play was published, the advent of the Civil War would show only too vividly how right he had

been to wonder whether there was still any consensus over the nature of treason. *Perkin Warbeck* showed Ford's prescience in this, and it showed, too, how useful the mention of the Stanley family could still be in raising this very question, and that other, far more important question of how much truth there is in the histories that we are told.

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Notes

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[1] Charles Nicholl, *The Reckoning: The Murder of Chrisopher Marlowe*, 2nd edition (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 276.

[2] Albert J. Loomie, S. J., *The Spanish Elizabethans: The English Exiles at the Court of Philip II* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1963), pp. 147-8.

[3] Ethel Seaton, 'Marlowe, Robert Poley, and the Tippings', *Review of English Studies* 5 (1929), pp. 273-287, p. 285.

[4] See Lisa Hopkins, '"Malta of Gold": Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*, and the Siege of 1565', *(Re)Soundings* 1:2 (June, 1997). Online: http://www.millersv.edu/~resound/*vol1iss2/topframe.html

[5] Emily Bartels, *Spectacles of Strangeness: Imperialism, Alienation and Marlowe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p. 90.

[6] Ernle Bradford, *The Great Siege: Malta 1565* [1961] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 222.

[7] Charles Nicholl, *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), p. 227.

[8] J. J. Bagley, *The Earls of Derby 1485-1985* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1985), p. 75.

[9] Bagley, *Earls of Derby*, pp. 21, 32, and 26.

[10] On the Stanleys' patronage of drama, see particularly Sally-Beth MacLean, 'A family tradition: dramatic patronage by the Earls of Derby', in *Region, religion and patronage: Lancastrian Shakespeare*, edited by Richard Dutton, Alison Findlay and Richard Wilson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 205-226.

[11] Bagley suggested that he had built it (*Earls of Derby*, p. 76), but Siobhan Keenan points out that one Richard Harrington was directly responsible, though she thinks that the 6th Earl may well have encouraged it (*Travelling Players in Shakespeare's England* [Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002], p. 153). On the Prescot playhouse see also David George, 'The playhouse at Prescot and the 1592-1594 plague', in *Region, religion*

and patronage: Lancastrian Shakespeare, edited by Richard Dutton, Alison Findlay and Richard Wilson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 227-242.

[12] E. A. J. Honigmann, *Shakespeare: the 'lost years'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 60, 62-4, and 154.

[13] E. A. J. Honigmann, *John Weever* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), pp. 69-70.

[14] Ladye Bessiye, Part One, ll. 17-18. I quote from the version available on the Chadwyck-Healey Literature Online database. Online: http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk

[15] George Buc, *History of Richard the Third*, p. 128. For discussion of the letter's authenticity, see for instance Alison Hanham, 'Sir George Buck and Princess Elizabeth's letter: a problem in detection', *The Ricardian* vol. 7, no. 97 (June, 1987), n.p., and A. N. Kincaid, 'Buck and the Elizabeth of York Letter: a reply to Dr Hanham', *The Ricardian* vol. 8, no. 101 (June 1988), n.p.

[16] Sir William Cornwallis the Younger, *The Encomium of Ruchard III*, edited by A. N. Kincaid (London: Turner & Devereux, 1977), pp. 27 and vii.

[17] Honigmann, *Weever*, p. 65.

[18]This was first suggested in Barbara Breasted, '*Comus* and the Castlehaven Scandal', *Milton Studies* 3 (1971), pp. 201-224.

[19]Frances Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England 1550-1700* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 80.

[20] See Lisa Hopkins, 'Touching Touchets: *Perkin Warbeck* and the Buggery Statute', *Renaissance Quarterly* 52:2 (summer, 1999), 384-401.

[21]The other references to Audley in the play are at I.iii.133, III.i.48, and III.i.75.

[22] William Warner, *Albions England* [1612] (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1971), book 7, ll. 268-71.

[23] Thomas Gainsford, 'The true and wonderful History of *Perkin Warbeck*, proclaiming himself *Richard the Fourth*' (London, 1618), p. 523.

[24] John Ford, *The Chronicle History of Perkin Warbeck*, in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore and Other Plays*, edited by Marion Lomax (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), II.ii.18-20. All further quotations will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.