

THE SURVIVAL OF CHIVALRIC IDEAS DURING
THE WARS OF THE ROSES; A SELECTIVE
STUDY OF THE CONCEPTS OF CLASS,
LOYALTY AND PROWESS

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by
James G. Blanchard
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ABBREVIATIONS

- Arrival - Historie of the Arrival of Edward IV in England and the Final Recovery of His Kingdom from Henry VI, J. Bruce, ed., (London: Camden Society, 1838).
- Bale - Bale's Chronicle in Six Town Chronicles, Ralph Flenley, ed., (London: Oxford U.P., 1911).
- B.I.H.R. - Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research.
- Croyland - Second and Third Continuations in Ingulf's Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland, H. T. Riley, ed., (London: Bohn's Antiquarian Library, 1854).
- Davies - An English Chronicle 1377-1461, John S. Davies, ed., (1856; rpt. London: Johnson Reprint Company, 1965).
- D.N.B. - The Dictionary of National Biography, L. Stephen and Sydney Lee, eds., (London: Oxford U.P., 1922).
- E.H.R. - English Historical Review.
- Gregory - Gregory's Chronicle in Historical Collections of a Citizen of London, James Gairdner, ed., (1868; rpt. London: Johnson Reprint Company, 1965).
- Malory - The Works of Thomas Malory, Eugene Vinaver, ed., (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1971).
- Paston Letters - The Paston Letters, James Gairdner, ed., 5 vols., (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1910).
- Order of Chivalry - Ramon Lull, The Book of the Order of Chivalry, trans. William Caxton, ed., (London: Early English Text Society, 1926).
- Rebellion - Chronicle of the Rebellion in Lincolnshire, 1470, Nichols, J. G., ed., (London: Camden Society, 1847).
- Short English Chronicle - Three Fifteenth Century Chronicles, James Gairdner, ed., (1880; rpt. London: Johnson Reprint Company, 1965).
- T.R.H.S. - Transactions of the Royal Historical Society.
- Tree of Battles - Honore de Bonet, The Tree of Battles, ed. and trans. G. W. Coopland, (Liverpool: Liverpool U.P., 1949).

Vitellius - Vitellius Manuscript in Chronicles of London, Charles Kingsford, ed., (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1905).

Warkworth - John Warkworth, A Chronicle of the First Thirteen Years of Edward IV, J. O. Halliwell, ed., (London: Camden Society, 1839).

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this thesis is to attempt to discover whether certain of the group of ideas known as Chivalry influenced the English aristocracy during the Wars of the Roses. As we shall see, in the Historiography chapter, it has long been an historical commonplace to say that Chivalry was dead by the time of the Wars, and that the period 1450 to 1485 was marked by an absence of idealism and restraint among the nobility who were the chief participants in the struggle. But the notion that these men were consciously motivated only by a cool Machiavellian interest in their own survival and in gaining power is not supported by the main sources for this thesis. A careful analysis of these sources suggests that the transition from a medieval to Renaissance world may not have been as swift, at least in the area of the ideas of the ruling class, as some earlier historians seem to have thought. This conclusion is upheld by at least some of the vast amount of scholarly research that has been done on the period during the twentieth century and especially since 1945. Always keeping in mind the transitional nature of the period, there was still a surprising amount of chivalric thinking about and chivalric motivation of the actions of the main protagonists.

It is essential that brief definitions of two key terms, the Wars of the Roses and chivalry, be given. The expression Wars of the Roses was first used by Sir Walter Scott in Anne of Geierstein, chapter seven; this is, in a way, appropriate, since more has been written about the period by artists like Scott and Shakespeare, and also by literary scholars, than by historians. A more appropriate name for the period might be the first English Civil War, for that is what the conflict, in all its phases, really was.

The Wars of the Roses were a struggle between factions of nobles over control of the throne. Open fighting broke out on three occasions, between the years 1459 and 1461, between 1469 and 1471, and again in 1485. But it could be said that the civil war lasted from soon after 1450 until 1485, because through all those years there existed a party, either in England or abroad, who challenged the right to power of the ruling faction. In this thesis we will be concerned mainly with the periods of open fighting, for these were the times when the effects of chivalric idealism would be most likely to be displayed.

It might be questioned whether this period of unrest really deserves the name "war". J. R. Lander has recently pointed out that it is unlikely that there was widespread chaos and disruption, and that only a small portion of the population was actually involved in the 12 or 13 weeks of camp-

aigning which took place during the 35-year period. He points out that compared to the carnage which took place in the French war zones during the Hundred Years War, the English experience was very mild.¹

To this it ought to be objected that there is some danger in judging by modern standards the fighting which took place during the Wars of the Roses. The number of people actively involved in English politics was growing during the 1400's but still represented a minority of Englishmen. One would not expect, therefore, vast numbers to be involved in the conflict. The fate of Jack Cade and the other rebels of 1450 may have discouraged the common people from taking any part in politics. The lives of the common folk in the paths of the armies were certainly disrupted, whether because they were summoned in array to serve or had their property destroyed or stolen. As for the length of the campaigns, they were no shorter than most medieval wars, with the exception of the Hundred Years War. With reference to this, it should be remembered that at times two or even three armies were drawing on the limited resources and manpower of England. War might well feed and fatten on the rich lands of France for a full century, but it would quickly starve in relatively poor England. Even when there was no open fighting, there was a fairly constant possibility of it, especially when the French king and the Duke of Burgundy were aiding one or other of the

two factions.

When war did break out, it displayed all the traditional signs of medieval warfare. Perhaps the principal sign was the unfurling of the King's banner;² and after 1455, when Henry VI's banner was unfurled in the presence of the Yorkists at St. Alban's, this was done at every major battle. There were a few sieges, mostly in Northumberland, in addition to 13 battles. There was some looting during Queen Margaret's march toward London in 1461. All these things signified to medieval men that a state of war existed.³

Although the battles of the wars were few in number, they usually had far-reaching political consequences. Indeed, one modern scholar has likened the battlefields of the Wars of the Roses to a sort of "supreme court" where the disputes of the noble factions were finally decided.⁴ Like many before them the Yorkist Kings pointed to their victories in the field as signs of God's sympathy for their cause. As we shall see, this was an important part of Yorkist propaganda.⁵

The Wars of the Roses were then a civil war, yet one that exhibited all the characteristics of warfare according to international medieval chivalric concepts. Like all civil wars, it was more vicious than other kinds of warfare. Prisoners, for example, were almost never held for ransom, an important characteristic of medieval war. It is unlikely, had an English army captured the French king in battle, that

he would have been executed as Henry VI apparently was, or his corpse mutilated the way Richard III's was. Notwithstanding this important exception, it was a war in the medieval sense and recognizable by contemporaries as such.⁶

A study of the periods of armed conflict during the wars is of great importance to this thesis, not only because of their influence on political changes but because of what they can reveal of the influence of chivalric ideals. Indeed, this thesis is something of the nature of an exercise in military history, though one which does not set out to describe battles with their attendant strategy and tactics. It seeks to show that men in battle are controlled by ideas and influences brought with them from society at large. Fighting is just one activity of the human animal, and this cannot be extracted and studied without reference to the economic, political and, what concerns us in this thesis, the cultural and intellectual background of the combatants.

Chivalry was an important part of this cultural and intellectual background. In the context of this thesis, chivalry may be defined as a collection of ideas that comprised the ideology of the ruling warrior aristocracy in western Europe in the middle ages. By ideology is meant the way in which they perceived themselves and the world around them. It was not an organized system of ideas, but a body of traditions and virtues, recorded and preserved in literature, histories, moral treat-

ises and handbooks of etiquette.

The development of chivalry is a long and complex story and, at the risk of over simplification, it may be said that chivalric idealism was born of three main influences. First was that of the Germanic ancestors of the medieval European aristocracy, who contributed a respect for such warlike virtues as loyalty and prowess, upon which we will be concentrating in this thesis. Second, with the beginning of the Crusades, Christian writers like St. Bernard of Clairveaux, who wrote the rule of the Templar order, attempted to redirect the skill and courage of the warrior class and use them for what they felt were Christian ends. Third was the influence of the beginning of court life in the twelfth century, when elaborate etiquette and a unique view of sex and love were added to the collection of ideas that comprised Chivalry.

The choice of the chivalric concepts to be studied in this thesis - loyalty, prowess and class distinction - was really dictated by the sources. There is very little evidence of what we might call Christian Chivalry during the period; the crusade was largely a thing of the past, and the ability of the Church to inspire the warrior class was on the wane. This is not to say that Christian chivalry was dead, any more than courtly chivalry could be said to be a thing of the past simply because no detailed records of court life survive. It is probable that chivalry greatly influenced the relations of

noble men and women at the court of Edward IV and Queen Elizabeth, but no letters or diaries or records of any sort remain, besides the household account books for certain years.

What the sources, the chronicles and letters, do tell us is concerned with the realm of politics and the military struggles that were a part of the contest for political power. At once one notes that they touch upon the three ideas of loyalty, prowess and class distinction, and thus afford us an opportunity to try and determine what influence these concepts had.

The method used to do this is quite simple. All the sources were studied and all the references to these three ideas were noted and analyzed. The references were sometimes implicit, but more often they involved the use of some other words like "treason" or "rebel" or "true" in the case of loyalty, or "manly" in the case of prowess which seemed to be closely related to the idea. The frequency of the words was tabulated to give some indication of how prominent the particular idea was in the source. These techniques give us some idea of the source writer's attitude to the selected chivalric ideas. To my knowledge these sources have never been analyzed in this way before,⁷ and in this may lie whatever original contribution the thesis has to make. Of course, admittedly it is more difficult to ascertain the effect that the ideas had on the aristocrats of the period, and no one

can say precisely what the extent of chivalry's influence was. We will have to be satisfied with the knowledge that it exercised some influence, perhaps a significant one. This can be shown by analyzing specific situations in which specific aristocrats were involved, and their reactions to these situations.

Chapter I FOOTNOTES

- ¹The Wars of the Roses, ed. J. R. Lander. (London: Secker and Warburg, 1965), p.21.
- ²"Politics and the Battle of St. Alban's BIHR", ed. C. A. J. Armstrong, 33(1960), p.39.
Armstrong writes that as soon as Henry unfurled his banner a state of war existed and the Yorkists were automatically traitors for having waged war on their king. See also M. H. Keen, The Laws of War in the Later Middle Ages. (London: Routledge, Kegan, Paul, 1965), pp.105-6.
- ³Laws of War, ed. M. H. Keen, pp.101-18.
- ⁴The End of the House of Lancaster, ed. R. L. Storey. (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1966), p.17: "the feuds were...finally transferred, as if to a supreme court, to the battlefields of the civil war."
- ⁵"The Inauguration Ceremonies of the Yorkist Kings", TRHS, ed. C. A. J. Armstrong, 30, 4th series (1948), p.69.
See also the chapter on Prowess in this thesis, pp.8-10. The same argument was used by Henry V after Agincourt to support his claim to the French throne. England in the Later Middle Ages, ed. M. H. Keen. (London: Methuen, 1974), p.36.
- ⁶All the sources dwell heavily on the periods of armed conflict. See the charts at the end of the chapter on Prowess for the proportions of the works devoted to describing war.
- ⁷All previous studies of these sources seem to be concerned with the manuscripts their origin and authorship. This is true both of the comments made by the editors who prepared the works for publication and of scholarly articles about the sources. See, for example, "The Second Croyland Continuation-was it written in 10 days?" BIHR, ed. J. G. Edwards, 39 (1966), and "The Arrival of Edward IV-the development of the text", Speculum, ed. J. A. F. Thompson, 46 (1971). Gervase Matthew has written a short study of knightly virtues as revealed in the romances of the 1300's. See his "Ideals of Knighthood in Late Fourteenth Century England" in Studies in Medieval History Presented to F. M. Powicke, ed. R. W. Hunt. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), pp.354-62.

CHAPTER II

HISTORIOGRAPHY

This chapter is intended to provide a review of the historical literature relevant to the subject of English chivalry during the Wars of the Roses. By historical literature is meant the original authorities, and whatever subsequent histories and scholarly articles have some bearing on the subject of the thesis. This review will necessarily include a summary of the different points of view taken by historians in a number of historical debates. Only those works that have been of use in the research and writing of this paper are discussed here.

1. Original Sources

The period of the Wars of the Roses was a time of transition in the recording of history. The last of the great monastic chronicles, like that of the abbey of St. Alban's, were dying out. They had only just begun to be replaced by the town chronicles written by wealthy London bourgeois and the earliest humanist-inspired histories. The decline of the monastic chronicles was closely related to the decline of the use of Latin as the language of history, and the increase in the use of English. The monks had finally been displaced as the custodians of history and by mid-century were actually

translating secular English histories into Latin, in an attempt to keep their language alive.¹

There is one major exception to this general pattern, namely the continuation of Ingulph's Chronicle of Croyland. There are actually two continuations which deal with our period, the second and the third, and they were written by two very different authors. The second continuator was a Croyland monk who wrote in the 1460's and whose view was bounded by the convent wall. The third continuator was probably not a monk but a secular clergyman, perhaps a bishop or academic. We know that he undertook diplomatic missions for Edward IV and participated in the negotiations with Louis XI before the truce was signed between the two monarchs in 1475. He may have been a resident of Croyland monastery by the time he wrote his continuation in the 1490's, but he had been active in the world and his viewpoint is less restricted than that of his predecessor.

Both these writers follow the traditional model of monastic chronicles. They built their histories on the framework first erected by St. Augustine, and followed thereafter by chroniclers. The basic assumption in this view of history is that it is a record of the unfolding of God's will. Both continuators sprinkle their narratives with the usual accounts of miracles and astronomical phenomena which were for them

the visual evidence of God's activity;² they seldom miss an opportunity to draw a moral for their readers from the calamities that befall historical figures;³ and because they are writing a monastic chronicle they often interrupt the flow of secular events to insert information about the life of their abbey.⁴

Many of the other original sources, although written by a variety of authors, retained the name chronicle and even some of the characteristics mentioned in connection with the Croyland Chronicle. John Warkworth's Chronicle of the First Thirteen Years of Edward IV was written shortly after the close of our period. Warkworth, who was master of St. Peter's College, Oxford, from 1473 to 1498, seems to have been close to the centres of power, judging from the details he provides. He writes a simple, unadorned narrative, but he is a cleric and he occasionally points a moral or inserts a proverb.

X
C. L. Kingsford says of the Brut Chronicle that "it was indeed the most popular and widely difused history of the time, and for this reason alone should command careful attention."⁵ The various copies and continuations of the Brut in the 1400's served as models and sources for other histories. The so-called second continuation was written during the first decade of Yorkist rule and therefore is favorable to Edward IV's regime. This version was used by Caxton when he prepared his

printed editions of the Brut, which he called Chronicles of England, the first history issued in print in England.

The English Chronicle edited by John Davies for the Camden Society in 1856 follows the Brut; but from 1400 to its end in 1461 it incorporates important additions to the standard Brut narrative. The identity of the author is now lost, but he wrote about our period in 50 pages. The detailed account includes some valuable documents, such as the text of the letter sent by the Yorkists to Henry VI on the eve of Ludlow,⁶ and a copy of the agreement reached between Henry and the Duke of York in 1460.⁷

The Arrival of Edward IV in England and the Chronicle of the Rebellion in Lincolnshire differ in a number of ways from the other histories written at the time. They deal with a much shorter span of time, the Arrival describing the three months from March to May, 1471, during which Edward regained his throne, and the Rebellion covering the three week crisis in March 1470. To these short periods the authors devote 40 and 12 pages respectively. They are both quite sophisticated narratives, and the Arrival in particular shows a concern for causation that is not seen in any of the other sources. They are both good examples of Yorkist propaganda. The Arrival was written by a "servant of the King" and a French version was sent to Edward's creditors in Flanders to reassure them that they had backed the right man.

The Chronicles of the White Rose of York, edited by J. A. Giles in 1845 contains versions of both these histories, as well as an interesting independent source, called Hearne's Fragment.⁸ It was written between 1514 and 1522 by some member of the Duke of Norfolk's household. It has a clear Yorkist bias, the author asserting that "in avoiding all inconveniences, colored chronicles, and affectional histories, my purpose is to tell the truth."⁹ He is, of course, referring to the Tudor propaganda that had long since begun to pour forth, denigrating the house of York. He claims to write as an eye witness to the events that he describes, events which span the years 1460-9.

Almost by default, the so-called town chronicles are a major source of information for details of the first two decades of our period. The town chronicles were not a new phenomenon in the fifteenth century;¹⁰ they had even enjoyed something of a revival, especially in London, at the beginning of the century. The rich burghers began to take an interest in their city's past and important events were recorded with care. These chronicles, as they were inevitably called, "accompanied in London and succeeded in other towns the more narrow and official borough records."¹¹ They were usually written in English and divided according to mayorial years - part of the official data which some of them preserve is the name of the