

The Incorporation of Identities in *Perkin Warbeck*: A Response to Lisa Hopkins*

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In her thoughtful and provocative essay on John Ford's *The Broken Heart*, Lisa Hopkins raises a number of important issues around the dramatisation of national identities in Ford's corpus. In this brief response I cannot hope to do justice to her incisive suggestion, argued with great authority and insight, "that a concern about the relationships between different nations is not confined to *The Broken Heart*, or even to *Perkin Warbeck*, but is a recurrent element of Ford's dramatic work as a whole."¹ What I can do, picking up on what Hopkins rightly identifies as an enduring preoccupation on Ford's part with land, inheritance and titles, is to indicate some ways in which *Perkin Warbeck* fits into this territorial framework. In fact, I want to argue that the play sheds light on what the new seventeenth-century historiography calls the "British Problem," the successive crises of sovereignty that beset the British polity throughout the early modern period, and which come to a head in the 1640s. What I have to say is thus less a follow-up than a footnote to Hopkins.

Perkin Warbeck can be read as an untimely example of a Stuart history play that confronts questions of identity in the three kingdoms at the inception of the Tudor Myth. Ford's text in fact participates in three historical junctures—the 1490s, where it is set, the 1590s, whose history plays it recalls, and the 1630s, where it both anticipates and participates in a decade of violent political upheaval. *Perkin Warbeck* charts the progress of the pretender from the moment he disembarked at Cork in 1491 posing as Richard IV to his execution at Tyburn on 23 November

*Reference: Lisa Hopkins, "I am not Oedipus': Riddling the Body Politic in *The Broken Heart*," *Connotations* 6.3 (1996/97): 259-82.

1499. Staged initially in the year that Edmund Spenser's *A View of the State of Ireland* (1633) was first published, Ford's play, like Spenser's text, is an untimely meditation on the past that carries with it portents of the future. Ford's full title reads: "*The Chronicle Historie of Perkin Warbeck. A Strange Truth.*"² The "Strange Truth" of *Perkin Warbeck* is that it is a compelling instance of a revisionist literary text, a play that both revives and revises the Tudor Myth, parodying the genre of the history play, mocking established models of monarchical authority, and displacing the centre of power from London to a host of national and regional settings on the so-called "margins" of metropolitan English culture—Cornwall, Ireland, Scotland. Ford's abridgement of the British Problem in *Perkin Warbeck* poses questions of sovereignty and statehood that are especially vexed in the context of a composite monarchy. In keeping with a central motif in his other plays, Ford asserts that: "Eminent titles may indeed inform who their owners are, not often what." *Perkin Warbeck* negotiates the space that can open up between status and substance. He who plays the king, he who is deemed a pretender, may be more monarchical than he who sits on the throne. Claims of right are Ford's lasting concern.

Perkin's progress foreshadows the new course of British history, which will see a shift in English investment from Wales to Scotland. Henry VII complains of feeling like "a mockery king in state" (I.i.4). He rails against Warbeck, and observes that:

Foreign attempts against a state and kingdom
Are seldom without some great friends at home. (I.i.84-5)

"Home" and "foreign" are of course vexed categories in a British context, for where does "home" end and "foreign" begin? It comes as no surprise, either to the historian of the early modern period, or to the student of the British Problem, to learn from whence Perkin Warbeck found support for his claim: Ireland (I.i.105-9). Since the pretender is an "airy apparition" of a king, Henry curses "th'superstitious Irish" (I.iii.39).³ Having launched himself from Ireland, the pretender next seeks protection at the court of James IV, before finding "Ten thousand Cornish" willing to fight for him. If the Tudor Myth depended on the vindication of that dynasty, then the Stuart Myth subjects it to

interrogation, chiefly from the so-called “margins” of the British state, a state in turmoil in Ford’s time. My own view is that *Perkin Warbeck* is less a deconstruction of the Tudor Myth than a reconstitution of it that uncovers its ideological roots and routes, and at the same time passes comment on the first thirty years of Stuart rule.

Patricia Parker sees Shakespeare’s *Henry V* as being preoccupied with “England’s control over its border or borderers,” and this too is the crux of *Perkin Warbeck*.⁴ Ford, unlike Shakespeare, is writing in the wake of Anglo-Scottish union, when the boundary separating England and Scotland has been breached, and the respective sovereignties of those two countries are at once fused and confused, as the margins have rejoined and rejuvenated the centre.

James IV’s own justification for helping Warbeck is revealing. The Scottish king points to the precedent of seeking foreign assistance to resolve domestic disputes (II.i.18-28). While James is defending the right of nations to petition for aid abroad, Henry is complaining of domestic disorder:

We are followed
By enemies at home that will not cease
To seek their own confusion. (II.ii.125-7)

Fresh intelligence arrives, informing Henry:

That James of Scotland late hath entertain’d
Perkin the counterfeit with more than common
Grace and respect, nay, courts him with rare favours.
The Scot is young and forward; we must look for
A sudden storm to England from the North;
Which to withstand, Durham shall post to Norham
To fortify the castle and secure
The frontiers against invasion there. (II.ii.149-56)

Ironically, when he comes to refer to Henry’s Tudor origins, James IV undermines at a single stroke both his adversary’s Englishness and his legitimacy:

The Welsh Harry henceforth
Shall therefore know, and tremble to acknowledge,

That not the painted idol of his policy
 Shall fright the lawful owner from a kingdom. (II.iii.62-5)

Henry's identity is no more fixed or firm than that of Warbeck, but is precisely "incontinent." Having moved from the Irish to the Scots, Warbeck next elicits help from Cornwall. The Scottish threat to English dominion is followed by a further hazard to the integrity of England, as Daubeney brings the news of yet another incursion from the periphery:

Ten thousand Cornish,
 Grudging to pay your subsidies, have gathered
 A head, led by a blacksmith and a lawyer;
 They make for London. (II.iii.129-32)

The occupant of the English throne plays one component of the state off against others. Thus "Welsh Harry," as James called him, celebrates the victory over the "Cornish rebels" on "Saint George's Fields" (III.i.9). This victory, it has been noted, was achieved historically by virtue of a heavy reliance "on the loyalty of the Welsh contingents."⁵ In *Henry V* the king, despite his claims to Welsh origins, had been addressed as "Harry of England" (III.6.118), and had cried "God for Harry! England and Saint George!" (III.i.34) We can see here a gap opening up between Tudor and Stuart interpretations of history. With the accession of James I, it was no longer necessary to appeal to the antiquity of Welsh origins or to ancient British origin myths, since a new unified political system, a constellation that included Scotland, was now a reality. While Shakespeare's Henry V made much of his Welsh pedigree in order to foreground the provenance of the Tudor regime, Ford offers a case for preferring the English pretender—supported most notably by the Scots, but also buttressed by Irish and Cornish elements—over the English incumbent who owes his existence to the Welsh.⁶ We can juxtapose Henry VII's Welshness and defensive Englishness to Perkin Warbeck's resort to non-English sources of support.

Perkin Warbeck shares the concerns of Shakespeare's histories. Throughout Ford's play, national boundaries are broached by invasion and the forging of alliances. When he weds Katherine Gordon, daughter

of the Earl of Huntly, Warbeck declares that "An union this way," that is, through marriage, "Settles possession in a monarchy" (II.iii.79-79). A union any other way may be not quite so secure, such as the various acts of incorporation or conquest that marked the slow coming together of the British state. Union through marriage furnishes a relatively painless means of fleshing out the body politic. Warbeck's words are prophetic, of course, since another marriage, between James IV and Margaret Tudor, will pave the way for an accommodation with England.

The view that Ford is doing something radical with the history play can find supporting evidence in a number of features of Ford's presentation. One example is in the area of gender relations. Ford can be seen to be shifting the gender balance in the genre. One can instructively contrast Henry V's courting of the French Catherine in Shakespeare's play with Warbeck's wooing of the Scottish Katherine in Ford's drama. The sexual politics of the play are crucial. Jean Howard has written of Warbeck's apparent or alleged "effeminacy," the representation of his relationship with Katherine Gordon as one of intimacy, closeness, reciprocity and tenderness, a relationship absent from other history plays.⁷ Where Shakespeare's histories arguably present essentially masculine models of monarchical rule, Ford is concerned with a different configuration of sovereignty and sexual politics.⁸

The pretender's wedding itself sees a marriage of cultures. Warbeck's Irish followers fear being upstaged at the celebrations that follow the ceremony:

'tis fit the Scots
Should not engross all glory to themselves
At this grand and eminent solemnity. (II.iii.139-41)

The father of the bride, Huntly, mocks the mixture of Scottish and Irish entertainment:

Is not this fine, I trow, to see the gambols,
To hear the jigs, observe the frisks, b'enchanted
With the rare discord of bells, pipes and tabors,
Hotch-potch of Scotch and Irish twingle-twangles,
Like so many quiristers of Bedlam
Trolling a catch! (III.ii.2-6)

Irish and Scottish entertainers appear, in a scene that seems both to recall and parody Ben Jonson's *Irish Masque at Court* (1613).⁹ The stage direction reads:

Enter at one door four Scotch Antics accordingly habited; enter at another four wild Irish in trowsers, long-haired, and accordingly habited. Music. The masquers dance.

Whereas Jonson's *Irish Masque* was ostensibly a compliment to the conversion powers of James I, as the rude Irish masquers revealed themselves to be sophisticated Anglo-Irishmen, in Ford's play the entertainment for James IV is more ambiguous, designed both to expose the lack of cultivation in evidence when popular Scottish and Irish traditions converge, and to suggest that Scotland and Ireland have more in common culturally than either has with England. If the Scoto-Irish combination amuses Huntly, it also serves to point up the difference between the English and Scottish courts. As Jonas Barish observed: "Not only does love bulk large at the Scottish court—we hear nothing of it in England—but there is also ceremony and revelry, music, dancing, feasting, and masquing."¹⁰ Perkin's model of Englishness and courtly conduct is at odds with Henry's potent but problematic mixture of grim severity, military prowess, and underhand political manoeuvring. The pretender holds out the promise of a different kind of Anglo-Scottish relationship than that of an unbalanced incorporating union. Warbeck, having thanked James for his "unlimited" favour, speaks of the alliance that must ensue when the pretender takes his proper place on the English throne:

Then James and Richard, being in effect
One person, shall unite and rule one people,
Divisible in title only. (III.i.106-8)

While Warbeck seeks the assistance of the Celtic nations that encircle England, Henry has a "charm" that will break the spell Warbeck has woven over James IV. He has a Continental card up his sleeve. Facing Scottish forces, Surrey remarks that not only is the time out of joint, but the "frame" (IV.i.12) is too. The national context of the dispute over the English throne is criss-crossed by various kinds of foreignness. We learn

of Henry's attempts to woo James from Warbeck with promises of a British and European peace, in the shape of amicable relations with both Spain and England. Outflanked by Henry's politicking, Warbeck finds succour in the news that the Cornish are entreating him to land in Cornwall with a force and lead them against Henry. Astley, one of Warbeck's followers, sums up the situation thus:

. . . that if this Scotch garboils do not fadge
to our minds, we will pell-mell run amongst the Cornish
choughs presently and in a trice. (IV.ii.57-59)

Ultimately, Warbeck is hopelessly outmanoeuvred by Henry. While the pretender draws support from Scotland, Ireland and Cornwall, the king outwits him through some devious intrigues with Spain. Warbeck's "antic pageantry," recalling Hamlet's antic disposition, is no match for Henry's ruthless machinations. Perkin is literally eccentric insofar as he haunts the margins of the state. Hialas, the Spanish agent, proposes a union between Henry and James (IV.iii.1-4), recalling Warbeck's earlier appeal for one between himself, as Richard IV, and the Scottish king, and he urges James to accept the offer of a way of avoiding a damaging Anglo-Scottish war (IV.iii.14-15). By marrying Margaret, Henry's daughter, James will forge an alliance in blood that will bind Scotland and England together, aligned against the challenger forged in Ireland, that "common stage of novelty." The Scottish king cannot resist the prospect of such a happy solution to his quandary. As the ruler of a nation whose support for the claimant to the throne of a more powerful neighbour has placed his people at risk, James is pleased to have found such a simple way of saving face (IV.iii.56-60). With the Scottish door closed to Warbeck, Cornwall affords another vantage point from which to assail Henry. Like the English pales in France and Ireland, and the Marches of Wales and Scottish Borderlands, Cornwall offers an alternative English power base. Within the compass of a pale the English state is simultaneously at its most forceful and its most vulnerable. In keeping with the pretender's gift for choosing losers to back him, the Cornish are duly routed, though Warbeck is still at large, albeit ensnared "Within the circuit of our English pale" (IV.ii.3).

If Ford's treatment of the British Problem shifts the gaze from the English metropolis to the perceived margins of the state, then his play also has a crucial European dimension. Indeed, then as now one cannot separate developments in Continental Europe from issues affecting "The Continent of Great Britain." Jane Ohlmeyer's suggestion that the War of the Three Kingdoms in the 1640s was actually a War of Five, given the involvement of France and Spain, can be pushed back into the fifteenth-century, so that the British Problem is acknowledged to be inseparable from a much wider European Problem.¹¹

The strength of *Perkin Warbeck*, and its revolutionary import, is that the pretender emerges as a much more charismatic figure than the enthroned Henry, and the real centre of "The Continent of Great Britain," certainly in terms of the play, is the court of King James. Ford's version of events is in places dependent on historical sources, and yet, at the same time, in its sympathetic portrayal of the self-styled second son of Edward IV, it flies in the face of established historiography, and flatly contradicts previous canonical accounts of the pretender—one thinks here immediately of Thomas Gainsford's *True and Wonderful History of Perkin Warbeck* (1618) and of Francis Bacon's *History of the Reign of Henry VII* (1622).

Ford does not merely illustrate the contingency of kingship. He shows that there are other kingdoms whose claims to sovereignty impinge upon the English crown. The question of British identity at the heart of the play, and its implicit promotion of compromise, foundered with the advent of conflict in the three kingdoms in the 1640s. Promoting a narrow English national perspective on history is arguably not Ford's chief aim. In his play the fact that the court of James IV is given far more attention than that of Henry VII may reflect an overriding preoccupation with British statehood rather than English monarchy. After reading Ford's play, a piece of Caroline drama set on the cusp of the Tudor regime, and clearly informed by late Elizabethan history plays, one returns to Shakespeare's histories with a fresh insight into the shaping of "The Continent of Great Britain."

Ford is arguably concerned above all with the fortunes of Britain. Questions of sovereignty in the sense of both personal rule and political dominion are rehearsed throughout *Perkin Warbeck*. Within this

interlocking multiple monarchical matrix, one may detect the shadow of republicanism,¹² a republicanism that thrives in the non-English nations that make up the British state. The historical irony is that it was only when those nations threatened to usurp English authority that an English republic came into being, under Cromwell, a republic whose principal achievement was the reassertion of English supremacy within the three kingdoms. One may also discern here the rudiments of another concern of Ford's, the idea of advancement through merit. But the play furnishes us with more than a classic instance of Renaissance self-fashioning. It shows that the fashioning of a state from a number of nations and monarchies is a painful process, beset with troubles. The matter of sovereignty is complicated if an expansion of the state results in a questioning of monarchy. More than one crown in a state can amount to less than one crown. I would go so far as to suggest that what we have in Ford's play is a confrontation between two possible futures for Britain, a federal republic or a centralised monarchy. Moreover, the Continent of Great Britain is shown to be reliant upon the Continent of Europe, one composite monarchy among others.

That Warbeck should have to comb the Celtic Fringe in order to survive is marvellously apt given the way in which the Tudor Myth, centring on England and Wales, depended upon the suppression of Irish and Scottish elements in the nascent British state. What we get in the Stuart Myth, which reconfigures the relationship between the four nations, is the return of the repressed elements of the British state. Wales loses credibility and visibility, Scotland becomes crucial, and Anglo-Scottish partnership proves a necessary prerequisite for the successful recolonisation of Ireland.

In the figure of Perkin Warbeck, guardian of a "Strange Truth," the English claimant who derives his strength from the "borderlands" of "Great Britain," one may hear the distant rumble of a coming conflict. It would be tempting to see Ford as the Stuart revisionist of Tudor nationalism, but if Ford's is arguably a critical nationalism sensitive to the interplay of the three kingdoms, then Shakespeare is far less jingoistic than his most conservative English readers would attest. Much of Shakespeare's work, and not only in the histories, was concerned with rehearsing tensions made explicit in Ford's reprise of the chronicle play.

I prefer to see both playwrights wrestling with a problem that in recent years has been rather too exclusively the province of the professional historian.

As an English historical drama that foregrounds the non-English components of the British political state-in-formation, *Perkin Warbeck* provides an example of what Patricia Parker, with reference to Shakespeare, has termed "the edification from the margins . . . that can be gained by attending to what might appear the simply inconsequential."¹³ Ford's play is more than merely an ironic reflection on an outmoded theatrical genre. Rather, the play grapples with different modes of Britishness, conflictual identities that are also evident within those earlier historical dramas that have too readily been seen by critics, radical and conservative alike, as professing a narrow English nationalism. The body politic is not merely riddled, but dismembered in Ford's drama. In *Perkin Warbeck* England may be at the helm of Britain Incorporated, but the real business of politics unfolds in the extremities. Lisa Hopkins has expertly characterised Ford's project as one which works at the interface of "the crucial questions of both the Stuart succession and the English colonial enterprise," and she has amply illustrated the extent to which Ford's enterprise constitutes "a searching exploration of the problematics of the right to rule."¹⁴ She also hits the mark with her insistence that Ford's interest in elaborating upon these issues is not confined to *Perkin Warbeck*, his most obviously historical play. Topicality has no respect for genre. If the literary critic desires a model for exploring the British Problem in English Renaissance literature then it may be that, in addition to the sterling work of the born-again British historians, the literary texts of the period, particularly those hitherto seen to be preoccupied with a specific national context, may offer valuable insights. Moreover, they may be read in conjunction with cultural documents that are less easily classified as historical, but which nonetheless display, in subtle and sophisticated ways, an engagement with the truths of state and the lie of the land.

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NOTES

¹Lisa Hopkins, "I am not Oedipus': Riddling the Body Politic in *The Broken Heart*" 259. In what follows I am presenting an argument more fully developed in an essay entitled "Fording the Nation: The British Problem in *Perkin Warbeck*," forthcoming in a special early modern issue of *Critical Survey*, edited by Andrew Murphy. That essay was itself inspired in large part by another piece of work by Lisa Hopkins, "Perkin Warbeck: A Stuart succession play?" in her excellent volume *John Ford's Political Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994) 39-71.

²All references to *Perkin Warbeck* are to Keith Sturgess (ed.), *John Ford: Three Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970).

³Warbeck's followers include John a-Water, "sometimes Mayor of Cork." For a discussion of Perkin Warbeck's bases of support in Ireland, see Steven G. Ellis, *Tudor Ireland: Crown, Community and the Conflict of Cultures, 1470-1603* (London: Longman, 1985) 72-83.

⁴See Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (Chicago: The University of Chicago P, 1996) 168-69.

⁵See Glanmor Williams, *Henry Tudor and Wales* (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1985) 73.

⁶On Henry VII's relations with Wales, see Brendan Bradshaw, "The Tudor Reformation and Revolution in Wales and Ireland: The Origins of the British Problem," *The British Problem, c.1534-1707: State Formation in the Atlantic Archipelago*, ed. Brendan Bradshaw and John Morrill (London: Macmillan, 1996) 39-65.

⁷See Jean Howard, "'Effeminately Dolent': Gender and Legitimacy in Ford's *Perkin Warbeck*," *John Ford: Critical Re-Visions*, ed. Michael Neill (Cambridge: CUP, 1988): 261-79.

⁸For a sensitive and nuanced reading of modes of masculinity in Shakespeare see Alan Sinfield, "Masculinity and Miscegenation," *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Berkeley: U of California P) 127-42.

⁹See Stephen Orgel (ed.), *Ben Jonson: The Complete Masques* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1969) 206-12.

¹⁰Jonas A. Barish, "Perkin Warbeck as Anti-History," *EIC* 20.2 (1970): 161.

¹¹See Jane Ohlmeyer, *Civil War and Restoration in the Three Stuart Kingdoms: The Career of Randall MacDonnell, Marquis of Antrim, 1609-1683* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993) 14-17.

¹²For republicanism and contemporary drama, see also an earlier discussion in *Connotations*: Dale B. J. Randall, "The Head and the Hands on the Rostra: *Marcus Tullius Cicero* as a Sign of Its Time," *Connotations* 1.1 (1991): 34-54 and John Morrill, "Charles I, Cromwell, and Cicero (A Response to Dale B. J. Randall)," *Connotations* 1.1 (1991): 96-102.

¹³See Parker 1.

¹⁴Hopkins, "I am not Oedipus'" 276, 277. The interplay between "New World" colonisation and Stuart state consolidation is, as Hopkins ably indicates, one which warrants close critical attention. I have argued elsewhere that the process of British state formation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is both a prerequisite of empire and an exercise in English expansionism in itself. See "This Sceptred Isle': Shakespeare and the British Problem," *Shakespeare and National Culture*, ed. John Joughin (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997) 83-108.