

THE WILTON DIPTYCH: A POSTSCRIPT

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In the *Archaeological Journal* for 1948 Dr. Joan Evans argued persuasively that the crowned saints behind Richard II in the Wilton Diptych, though they symbolize Edmund the King with his arrow and Edward the Confessor with his ring, portray Richard's father the Black Prince and his grandfather Edward III. In that case the artist uses the 'polysemos' technique made fashionable by Dante, and the question arises: does he use it consistently, or have only these two of the five haloed figures a double meaning?

He arranges the figures in a line across the picture—St. Edmund, St. Edward and St. John the Baptist in the left panel, the Virgin and Child in the right—and hinges the line on a dark wood which is reminiscent of the *selva oscura* at the beginning of the *Divine Comedy*. Since this became in later literature the characteristic meeting place of earthly and heavenly beings, the artist's dark wood may well be a sign that earthly and heavenly meet all along the line in his haloed figures.

Another sign to that effect is the strong family likeness between the saints in the king's panel, and between Richard and the Virgin—even in their long tapering hands and crooked little fingers. The saints suggest a grey-haired father with a greying son on his right and a brown-haired son on his left. Their ages tally with those of Edward III and his two oldest sons towards the close of his reign: he was sixty-four when he died in June 1377; Edward Prince of Wales had been forty-five when he died in the previous June; John of Gaunt was then thirty-six. The persons essential to the story of the kingship of Richard of Bordeaux are these three, together with his mother, Joan of Kent, and his short-lived elder brother, Edward of Angoulême. His haloed sponsors in the Diptych exactly correspond to them group for group: an old man, two younger men, a mother and child.

In appearance, as far as we have the means of judging, the correspondence continues without fail. The portraits of the male ancestors of Richard cited by Dr. Evans show an unmistakable resemblance between the Black Prince and St. Edmund, and a fairly striking resemblance between Edward III and St. Edward. The equally reliable portraits of John of Gaunt and Joan of Kent in the *Troilus Frontispiece*¹ show just these degrees of resemblance to their counterparts in the Diptych. Gaunt and the Baptist have the same spare, lithe build, well-defined features and brown beard and moustache;² even the same sensitive, withdrawn look. Princess Joan has in common with the Virgin wide-set eyes, pointed chin, long neck and graceful bearing. Edward of Angoulême in the background of the *Frontispiece*, though almost too indistinct for comparison, seems vaguely like the Child. Individually some of the resemblances are extremely impressive; collectively they hardly

¹ This fine full-page miniature in a MS. of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* is reproduced in colour and discussed in detail in 'The *Troilus Frontispiece*', *Mod. Lang. Rev.*, xlv (1949), 161-77.

² The belief current in Gaunt's day that he was

a changeling (Armitage-Smith, *John of Gaunt*, 141) suggests that he was in some respect unlike the other sons of Edward III. May the difference have been that he had brown hair, they the red-gold hair of the Plantagenets, which everyone in the Diptych has (or had) except St. John the Baptist?

leave room for doubt that this is a series of family portraits, idealized perhaps, but not beyond recognition. We have as much cause to identify the Baptist and the Virgin with the uncle and mother of Richard as to identify the English royal saints with his father and grandfather. And if the Virgin represents Joan of Kent, presumably the Child in her arms represents her son Edward. Reverence in those days did not demand the segregation of divine and human.

The evidence from portraits alone might be considered enough to justify a consistently two-plane reading of the Diptych. But there is further evidence, thanks to the medieval artist's habit of establishing identity by means independent of an accurate likeness. In one scene of the *Troilus* Frontispiece no less than fourteen members of the royal clan are clearly labelled by devices which include gesture, position, and direction of gaze; for instance, one of a married couple looks at the other, a parent looks at or points to a child, and children are placed between their parents. The similar devices in the Diptych are always positively relevant on the secular plane, but not always on the sacred, so that the artist evidently thought of his chief figures first and foremost as the kinsfolk of Richard. We may do the same as we examine the details of the picture,¹ recalling the necessary data in the history of Richard.

After the death of the Black Prince many people expected that Edward III would elect his oldest surviving son to succeed him instead of his nine-year-old grandson.² But it had been the wish of the Prince that Richard should succeed. As he laying dying, Chandos Herald records, he insisted on his father and brother vowing in his presence that they would see his wish fulfilled. Accordingly Edward appointed Richard his heir, and in the turmoil following on the death of the old king, John of Gaunt bestirred himself to the utmost to get his nephew safely crowned.³ The right-hand gestures of the figures behind Richard (their left hands are occupied in holding arrow, ring and lamb) neatly epitomize the parts played by his father, grandfather and uncle in bringing about his coronation. The Black Prince and Edward III, *alias* St. Edmund and St. Edward, point to him as if electing him successor to the throne; John of Gaunt, *alias* St. John the Baptist, touches his shoulder as if supporting his undertaking. These gestures are also right for the patron saints of Richard. St. Edmund's red boots are appropriate to the martial fame of the Black Prince, who wears the same colour in the scene in the *Troilus* Frontispiece which commemorates his victory at Poitiers. The red of course serves to balance the cross on the banner of St. George, but in 'polysemos' works nothing of importance is meaningless, and red has no certain meaning in connexion with St. Edmund. Nor is it easy to see why the artist has made his crown less kingly than St. Edward's by jewelling it only on the base, unless he was thinking of the Black Prince in relation to his father.

Edward of Angoulême had died in 1370 at the age of six, having already won a reputation for Christ-like character.⁴ The infant Christ is looking at Richard while pointing with his right hand to the banner of St. George, which symbolizes, among other things, the realm of England. His left hand is open as though he had just

¹ With the additional warrant of Dante's declaration that in interpreting a 'polysemos' work we should attend first to the literal of historical meaning (*Convivio*, II, i; cf. Epistle to Can Grande on the *Divina Commedia*).

² *Chronique des règnes de Jean II et de Charles V*, ed. R. Delachenal (Paris, 1920), 181.

³ S. Armitage-Smith, *John of Gaunt* (1904), chap. ix.

⁴ *Froissart*, ed. Kervyn, viii, 428.

relinquished his hold on the staff from which the banner floats. On the earthly level these gestures are expressive of little Edward's handing-on of his inheritance to his younger brother. Richard's hands are extended in readiness to receive it, and to accept the Christian example which is being presented for his imitation.

The Virgin has directed his gaze to the right foot of the Child, which she holds towards him a little as if saying, 'Follow in His footsteps'. The *Troilus* Frontispiece shows Princess Joan in this role of mentor-in-chief to Richard, and we know that this was the essence of her teaching. The saint who represents her husband, and he alone of the three saints, is looking at her, while she is looking at Richard, who is placed between them. This is one indication that the figures on the circumference of the circle with Richard at its centre are to be regarded as his parents. Another husband-wife link between them is conveyed through the use of two shades of blue. The inner sleeves of the Prince are mainly of the 'blue of Mary's colour' worn by the Virgin. They also have a touch of the lighter blue which is associated with her in the dresses of her attendant angels and which forms one of the most arresting spots of colour in the picture where it appears on the right sleeve of St. Edward, the Founder of Westminster Abbey, *alias* Edward III, the Founder of the Order of the Garter. There is good reason to believe that Garter blue was deliberately reminiscent of the azure field of the French fleur-de-lys,¹ and the lighter blue in the Diptych is of that shade. We may take it to be Garter blue, fittingly made most conspicuous on the sleeves of the Founder, blended with Mary's colour in the sleeves of the Black Prince, the first Knight of the Order, and massed round his wife, who in her youth, when she had inspired an English victory as decisive as Crécy, had become the 'proximate cause' of the foundation of the Order.²

One of the two features of the Diptych which have drawn attention because of their extreme unusualness has already been mentioned—the placing of the four adult sponsors of Richard in a line. This surely is a broad hint at an ancestral line, apparently reinforced by the repetition of the number of adult sponsors in the four steps leading down from the dark wood to the level on which the young king kneels. The other unusual feature is the crown of thorns incised in the halo of the Child.³ That this has no secular reference may be doubted, and the historical situation was fraught with suffering to which it could refer: suffering for Edward of Angoulême in the prolonged mortal illness which deprived him of the English crown; for his parents in losing him, and for Richard in having to shoulder the burden of kingship while still a child. The hardness of his lot is implied by the rocky ground beneath him.

As Richard rode from the Tower to Westminster for his coronation the street at one point was strewn with mimic flowers of silver and gold, thrown down by young maidens in a cage suspended above it. Walsingham indicates that this was

¹ A. R. Wagner, 'The Order of the Garter, 1348-1948'. *Annual Report to 31st December, 1946*, 13.

² A few weeks after the triumph of Edward III and the Black Prince at Crécy in 1346, Joan of Kent, aged eighteen, inspired the overwhelming victory of the home-guard army against the Scots at Nevill's Cross. It was largely for this service that Edward presently honoured Joan by making a garter of hers the badge of his knights. In the scene in the *Troilus* Frontis-

piece commemorating her achievement at Nevill's Cross, and again in the scene showing her presiding over a Garter gathering in the last year of her life, she wears a shade of blue closely akin to the shade that surrounds her in the Diptych (Galway, 'Joan of Kent and the Order of the Garter', *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, i, 1947, 29-32, and 'The *Troilus* Frontispiece').

³ Thomas Bodkin, *The Wilton Diptych* (Gallery Books, No. 16, 1947), 7.

the climax of the ovation but does not say how many maidens to the cageful.¹ It is agreed that the number of angels in the flower-strewn right panel of the Diptych is eleven because Richard was in his eleventh year when he came to the throne. His accession was followed by an unofficial regency, exercised by his beloved mother until her death in 1385,² and then by his detested youngest uncle, Thomas Duke of Gloucester. It was only when Richard had defeated Gloucester by the *coup d'état* of May 3rd, 1389, that he became king in reality. To signalize the beginning of his actual reign he held 'a kind of re-coronation in St. Stephen's chapel, with a renewal of homage.'³ At a tournament in Smithfield in October of the following year, the Monk of Evesham informs us, he first displayed his White Hart badge, and this, figuring in the Diptych, dates it after his 're-coronation'. Richard was then twenty-two—twice the number of the angels, or the number of their wings. In this portrait he looks nearer twenty-two than ten-and-a-half, but he might be more than twenty-two. A sufficient reason for the artist's notable vagueness about his age is that he was concerned with at least twelve years of Richard's life.⁴

The unofficial regency of Princess Joan lasted for eight years. Eight of the pairs of wings surrounding the Virgin are visible to the tip; eight of the White Harts surrounding her are visible in their entirety. Considering the relevance of the eleven angels to Richard, we cannot dismiss this repeated eight as certainly accidental or irrelevant to Joan. Richard's White Hart badge was an adaptation of the White Hind of his mother, which passed on her death to her older son by her first marriage, Thomas Holland, Earl of Kent.⁵ Opposite the Hart worn by Richard, a fraction of an inch above it, is one which at first glance may seem to be on the dress of an angel, like the others in the right panel, but on closer inspection appears to be on the mantle of the Virgin. This is as near as the artist could go to saying outright that on the earthly plane the Virgin is the mother of Richard, the owner of the source-badge of his White Hart.

We have not yet examined the entire network of secular identification marks in the Diptych, but already it has combined with the other evidence to leave no visible escape from the conclusion that the Virgin does represent the Princess, and, accordingly, that the Child represents Edward of Angoulême. Indeed the burden of proof now passes to any opposition there may be to recognizing the faces framed in haloes as those of Richard's kin.

Wherever the background of the Harts can be seen, they prove to be set on an oval of black, a customary symbol of mourning. And this is arranged in an open loop round the Virgin, with Richard's Hart brooch, under which the black patch is plainly visible, facing the opening. He had adapted the badge of his late mother soon after he became his own master. Added to that fact, the distribution of the symbols of mourning round the representative of Princess Joan implies that she is the person mourned. One notes, too, that the Virgin slightly dominates the Diptych as the Princess slightly dominates the only recognized memorial to Joan, the *Troilus* Frontispiece. May it be that the Diptych also is a memorial to her? There are several related points to consider.

¹ *Chron. Angl.* (Rolls Series), 155.

² T. F. Tout, *Chapters in the Administrative History of Medieval England* (1920-33), iii, 327-32, 454.

³ Evans, *Arch. Jour.*, cv (1948), 5.

⁴ For theories about the Diptych based on Richard's lack of beard, see Evans, loc. cit., 2.

⁵ Nichols, *Archaeologia*, xxix (1842), 37; A. C. Fox-Davies, *Complete Guide to Heraldry* (1909), 467.

Richard had two half-sisters, the Holland daughters of the Princess. Jeanne Duchess of Brittany died in 1384,¹ nearly a year before her mother. Maud Countess of St. Pol, who had inherited Joan's beauty, survived till 1392. In that year, Malvern records, Richard held a solemn funeral service for the Countess in Westminster Abbey on St. George's Day. She had been unpopular in England for some time after her French marriage in 1379, but one of Richard's first uses of the freedom he gained by his *coup d'état* a decade later was to bring Maud over from France for a long visit. She was back again in 1390² for the White Hart tournament, which amounted, because of her presence, to a reunion of the surviving children of the Princess. This earliest possible occasion for the designing of the Diptych is as likely as any; there is no sound evidence for placing its execution much later.

The two angels nearest the observer in the Diptych are differentiated in various ways from the others. They are unique in pointing to the Virgin—a filial gesture, and in looking at each other, as would befit sisters, and in being set apart from their companions and given more space, as befits important persons. The face of the kneeling one, shown like Richard's in profile, is a feminine copy of his; the face of the standing one, shown at the same angle as the Virgin's, is a less mature copy of hers. And this Virgin-like angel is visibly wearing the symbol of mourning, the other is not visibly wearing it. Given all these details, in this picture, it would need to be proved to be believed that the angels in the foreground do not represent the half-sisters of Richard: Maud Countess of St. Pol, who resembled and survived her mother, and Jeanne Duchess of Brittany, who did not live to mourn her.

One more point in this connexion has to do with the recognized memorial to Joan. At the time of her death (August, 1385) Richard and her two Holland sons were in the North on a punitive expedition against the Scots and French. The *Troilus* Frontispiece in its original form may have been painted soon after their return, most likely at the order of one of them: it includes all three, each conspicuous. But it notably does not include the Holland girls. Whatever the reasons for their omission, it left room for a memorial to Joan in which her daughters should be represented. One possibility is that the Diptych was ordered by the Countess of St. Pol and that she gave it to Richard in return for his hospitality on her long visits in 1389 and 1390. This would account for its 'French' note—not only in its artistry, which is widely agreed to show French influence, but in the stress it lays on the blood relationship of royal England with royal France by giving Richard and all the angels broom-pod collars and everyone except John of Gaunt the red-gold hair characteristic of the Plantagenets.

It has been claimed that the pearl-jewelled collar of broom pods worn by Richard is the one he received at the time of his marriage to the heiress of Charles VI of France, as a wedding gift from Charles.³ If so, the Diptych cannot have been painted before November, 1396. But the claim is not really tenable. For the gift collar was 'fait en façon de deux gros tuyaulx rons', it had 'branches' and 'fleurs' and the word *Jam*'s in gold letters, and on the front a large square balas ruby, whereas its supposed counterpart in the Diptych has none of these distinctive features. Besides, as Dr. Evans points out, Richard, being a Plantagenet, had a right

¹ *Cal. Pat. Rolls, 1381-85, 511.*

² *Devon, Issues of the Exchequer, 243; Rymer, Foedera, O.E., vii, 634, 675; Malvern, Polychronicon, ix, 215-16, 237, 241.*

³ Dr. Evans (*loc. cit.*, 4) discusses this view, presented by Miss Maud Clarke, and quotes Miss Clarke's description of the collar.

to use the broom pods on his own account, and did in fact use them on an effigy of himself which he caused to be made a year or more before his French marriage. His mother also was a Plantagenet, a granddaughter of Edward I and Margaret of France, and it may be that she too had used the *planta genesta* : it is associated with the derivative of her badge in the material of Richard's dress, and on his breast, where the collar touches his Hart brooch. As evidence for dating the Diptych the broom pods are broken reeds. They do nothing beyond suggesting that it may belong, like the broom pods on the effigy, to the period of Richard's courtship of alliance with France, which began not later than 1392.¹ The 'Confessor' shield on the reverse of the right panel is no more helpful, whether Richard adopted the device in 1394-5 or 1397-8, since the representation of it has every appearance of being a later addition by another hand.

So the possibility remains that the Diptych was commissioned by the Countess of St. Pol between the White Hart tournament of October, 1390, and her death in 1392. Or after her death Richard himself might have commissioned it. All the most important members of his family whom he had lost by St. George's Day, 1392, are in the picture, and clearly it is a *memento mori*. Equally clearly, however, the commemoration is primarily of the renowned Princess of Wales.

One cannot help thinking how admirably the Diptych would have served for display in St. George's chapel on Garter Day as a memorial to the 'proximate cause' of the foundation of the Order.² Nor, finally, how much we owe Dr. Evans for that action of the poet's eye without which we should have remained unaware of the earthly meaning in this heavenly painting.

¹ *Ibid.*, citing Miss Clarke on Robert the Hermit as a go-between for Richard and Charles from 1392. Earlier signs of the *entente cordiale* may be found in Malvern, *Polychron.*, ix, 260, and in *Foedera*, vii, 708; cf. 715-16, 738.

² In the summer of 1390 Richard ordered his

clerk of the works to renovate St. George's chapel at Windsor. The clerk at the time was Chaucer, whose greatest patroness had been Princess Joan, an enthusiast for Dante. In compliment to her his work became Dantesque, a fact perhaps not unrelated to the Dantesque quality of the Diptych.