IX.—KING ALFRED AND THE PROLETARIAT: A CASE OF THE SAXON YOKE

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The theory of the Norman Yoke was for a long period one of the most insistently held left-wing myths in England.[1] Though it was to take many forms, its main outlines were simple. Before the Norman conquest, there had been a free society of equal citizens and government by representative institutions. When William the Conqueror came, he brought with him a royal tyranny and the people lost their rights to the new landlords. Yet beneath the surface, the ideals of the conquered society remained as an inspiration to democratic agitation, and at times the people were able to extract concessions from their Norman overlords as they did with Magna Carta in 1215.

As has been correctly observed, the theory of the Norman Yoke does leave something to be desired as an historical account;[2] its idyllic picture of Anglo-Saxon democracy is an illusion. But as a myth to justify the demands of the people, it was a potent weapon, especially in the 17th Century. Needless to say, such a theory was stoutly resisted by those in authority. Particularly interesting in this respect is a case in which the myth was, in effect, turned on its head and the Anglo-Saxons made to appear to be the authors of a restricted rather than a popular government. In this portrayal, they were displayed as performing a noble rather than a base act and the impressive figure of King Alfred himself was conjured up to play the role of originator of the civil power of a limited oligarchy.

[1] C. Hill, "The Norman Yoke," in *Puritanism and Revolution* (London, 1958) pp. 50-122.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

The case in point appears in the play *The Love-Sick King* by Anthony Brewer, one of a limited number of 17th Century plays dealing with the Saxon period.[3] Actually, the chronology in Brewer's play is hopelessly mixed; he combines together events from 871, 1016, and 1400 with little regard for historical accuracy or chronology. In the play, King Alfred leads English resistance against the Danish King Canute, and in this he is aided by Roger Thornton, the Dick Whittington of Newcastle upon Tyne. In the end of the play, the Danes are defeated and taken prisoner by Thornton and his men. Alfred (called Alured throughout the play) is crowned King and then in gratitude confers a number of privileges on Thornton and Newcastle:

> And now to our worthy country-men
> It shall be texted to your lasting fame
> That your Newcastle strength set England free
> In this dayes fair and happy victory
> For which and for thy sake (most worthy Thornton)
> Wee'l give a lasting honour to the Town
> Now beautified by thee with Wals and Towers
> To which wee'l add all noble priviledge
> Belonging to a Town Incorporate;
> And for your former Government of Poretereans [sic]
> We here establish it a Mayoralty
> And Thornton as the first we here create
> Mayor of Newcastle and give thee power
> To elect a brotherhood of Aldermen
> With choice of Sheriffs to assist thy Government.
> Your charters shall be drawn with fullest strength
> Even with the fairest Cities of our Land,
> This sword confirms it from King Alured's hand;
> Bear it before ye still.[4]

[3] A. E. H. Swaen, ed. A. Brewer, *The Love-Sick King* in *Materialen zur Kunde des Älteren Englischen Dramas* vol. 18 (Louvain, 1907). See also *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne* third series, III, pp. 87-90 and M. H. Dodds, "'Edmund Ironside' and 'The Love-Sick King'", *Modern Language Review*, vol. 19 (1924) pp. 158-168.

[4] Brewer, *Love-Sick King*, ed. Swaen, pp. 50-51.

Thus is Alfred made the author of Newcastle's closed corporation. Of particular interest is the reference that this new arrangement has been made in place of *your former Government of Poretereans*. The meaning of *Poretereans* is, at best, obscure, but there is a strong possibility that this is a printer's error for *proletarians*, and this reading would, of course, underline the oligarchical implications of the scene.[5]

That this scene was meant to have such a meaning is further indicated when the history of the play itself is considered. The date of composition is not definitely known, but some of the circumstances surrounding its production do seem clear. In the first place, it was clearly written for performance in Newcastle upon Tyne; the local references and the sub-plot centred on Thornton reveal this much. Moreover, the play was apparently written to celebrate the visit of a King to the town and internal evidence makes it clear that the King in question was James I.[6] King James I is known to have made two visits to Newcastle: he stayed in the town from 9 to 13 April 1603 on his way to his coronation in London, and he later visited the town between 23 April and 4 May 1617.[7] On both occasions, the town oligarchy was involved in controversy over its chartered privileges and it would have been in the interest of the oligarchs to stress a respectable historical ancestry for their privileged position. In 1603-04 there was difficulty over the methods of election to town office as provided for in the charter of Elizabeth I;[8] in 1617 there was dispute over the conservancy of the Tyne in the course of which the inner ring of town governors in Newcastle successfully reasserted their right to control.[9]

[5] This is suggested by Swaen, *ibid.*, p. 61. The O.E.D. notes a few other uses of *Proletarian* or analogous words at this early date, for example by J. Jones in 1579 and by Holland in 1609.

[6] See Dodds, "Edmund Ironside and the Love-Sick King", p. 164.

[7] J. Brand, *History of Newcastle* (London, 1781) 2:450, 452; R. Welford, *History of Newcastle and Gateshead* (Newcastle, 1884-7) 3:219.

[8] R. Howell, *Newcastle upon Tyne and the Puritan Revolution* (Oxford, 1967) pp. 42 ff.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

It seems likely that the 1617 date may be the correct one. In the first place, James' visit in 1603 was both brief and sudden, and it is unlikely that there was time to prepare a stage production. But the visit of 1617 was long enough to allow such a performance and was, moreover, a visit marked by various festivities. In the second place, it would appear that *The Love-Sick King* was written after *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*; this would place it at least after 1607 and probably even later.[10]

One final incident could be noted which also seems to point to the use of the play as propaganda for the ancient foundation of the town's limited government. *The Love-Sick King* was published in 1655. This again marked an occasion when the corporate privileges of Newcastle seemed threatened, this time by Ralph Gardner who had tried to force parliamentary action against the oligarchs of Newcastle during the Barebone's Parliament of 1653 and in 1655 had published his account of these efforts and of the iniquities of the Newcastle Corporation in *Englands Grievance Discovered in Relation to the Coal Trade.*[11] The magistrates of Newcastle used efforts of all sorts to fend off any attempts to break their monopoly or to introduce any democratic element into the government of the town; it appears probable that among these efforts was an interesting use of what might be called the theory of the Saxon Yoke.

[10] Dodds, "Edmund Ironside and the Love-Sick King", pp. 158, 162.

[11] R. Gardner, *Englands Grievance Discovered in Relation to the Coal Trade* [1655] (Newcastle, 1796). On Gardner, see Howell, *Newcastle and the Puritan Revolution*, chap. 7.