The Image of Edward the Black Prince in Georgian and Victorian England: Negotiating the Late Medieval Past

Barbara Gribling

Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017

Review by: Kit Heyam

The Image of Edward the Black Prince in Georgian and Victorian England: Negotiating the Late Medieval Past. By Barbara Gribling. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017. ISBN 978-0-86193-342-6. xiii +171 pp. £50.00.

The use and representation of Edward the Black Prince is, as Barbara Gribling convincingly demonstrates in this slim book, an apposite and engaging lens through which to examine a myriad of aspects of Georgian and Victorian culture. Most obviously, the Black Prince provides a focus for a reassessment of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English medievalism. Gribling complicates the assumption that the Middle Ages were uncritically valorised in Victorian England, showing that attitudes towards and deployments of the Black Prince were decidedly heterogeneous. She also provides two important chronological correctives. Medievalism, in the sense of a preoccupation with the Middle Ages, was—contrary to popular and scholarly imagination—as much a Georgian phenomenon as it was a Victorian, and it overwhelmingly constituted a preoccupation with the *late* Middle Ages, specifically the period between 1200 and 1500. Yet, this book also demonstrates the Black Prince's relevance to several other, less obvious aspects of Georgian and Victorian culture: royal power and self-presentation, political reform, domesticity, militarism, masculinity, and national identity.

In doing so, Gribling draws on a gloriously diverse set of primary sources. We encounter the Black Prince in texts (Georgian and Victorian historical scholarship, history textbooks, news reports, letters, novels, children's stories, gentlemen's and boys' magazines); performance (plays, opera, melodrama, pantomime, a masked ball); visual art (paintings, carriage decoration, stained glass); and material culture (educational board games, needlework, sculpture, and the wonderfully titled "panstereomachia"—an exhibition of three-dimensional models made from "plastic marble"). This approach—an implicit challenge to the many historians who, consciously or not, insist on the primacy of textual sources as documentary evidence— provides a vivid sense of the multiple ways in which the people of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England engaged with their medieval past, and the extent to which this past permeated their culture as a result.

The book has an unusual structure, which, while Gribling justifies it well, threatens to obscure the development of some of the cultural concerns she discusses. It is divided into two parts—the first addressing 'royal' uses of the Black Prince, the second 'popular' uses—which are themselves structured differently. Part I is ordered chronologically, examining successive monarchs' deployments of the Black Prince. Gribling convincingly shows that there are marked differences between how these different figures used his image, and

that these differences were due in part to changing political contexts. Chapter 1 explores George III's uses of the Order of the Garter, both ceremonial and material—his revival of the Order; the significance of particular events, such as his 1771 installation of his son; his use of Windsor as a symbolic space; and his commissioning of a series of paintings of the Black Prince from Benjamin West—and the cultural productions, from ballads and drama to news reports, that drew on this. Chapter 2 analyses the competing representations of the Black Prince that surrounded the future George IV as prince, regent, and finally king: while George used the example of his medieval counterpart to argue desperately for a military post, others (such as William Pearce in his opera *Windsor Castle*) hoped to persuade him to emulate the Prince as a model of stable domesticity. Chapter 3, focusing on early Victorian uses of the Black Prince, demonstrates a growing problematisation of his legacy: romanticised accounts of his life inspired by the increasing popularity of historical novels were enjoyed by some but criticised by others for rose-tinting the brutality of war, while a planned fresco in the new House of Lords showing Edward III conferring the Order of the Garter upon the Black Prince caused something of an intellectual crisis over its arguable historical inaccuracy. A chronological structure is appropriate for the presentation of these arguments, and makes the book a useful source for scholars of Georgian and Victorian royal self-presentation.

Part 2 is structured thematically, addressing more 'popular' uses of the Black Prince in relation to three issues: political reform; chivalry and character; militarism and national identity. This structure again suits the subject matter, allowing Gribling to range across genres and decades to track the changing significations of the Black Prince in relation to these concerns. Chapter 4 explores representations of the Black Prince's role in the 1376 'Good Parliament' in the context of the growth of constitutional history and nineteenth-century agitation for political reform. Chapter 5 makes a compelling intervention into the history of English masculinity, considering its relation to militarism and national identity (as opposed to the feminising influence of France), and re-dating the height of English interest in chivalry to the late eighteenth century; the Black Prince is revealed to be consistently deployed in instructional and character literature as (variously) modest and restrained, polite, pious, and physically robust. Chapter 6 analyses representations of the Black Prince as military leader, the Georgian and Victorian construction of the fourteenth century as an age of military success, and the way this aspect of medievalism intersected with national identity and empire-building.

What this bisected argument inevitably lacks, however, is a sustained analysis of the impact of 'royal' uses on 'popular' ones, and vice versa. In

Gribling's short conclusion she states that, "This book makes a strong case for royal influence in shaping the late medieval revival"; but there is little consideration of the ways that this apparent flow of medievalist preoccupation between monarch, aristocrats, and 'popular' society functioned (137). Was it top-down, bi-directional, or more complex? A fuller conclusion might have explored this; certainly, there is further, interesting work to be done here regarding what Gribling refers to as the "intersect[ion]" between royal and "popular" uses of the past (138).

Among these many and diverse themes for which the Black Prince provides a focal point is another that Gribling does not make as explicit: the development of history as a discipline, its scholarly methodology, and its practitioners' understanding of truth and accuracy. Reports of disagreements concerning this recur throughout the book. George Payne Rainsford James's 1836 biography of the Black Prince, we are told, "was criticised for failing to adhere to modern standards of historical research" (54); Benjamin West's use of historical sources to inform his depictions of the Order of the Garter represented "a change in the methodology of history painting" (28), and while some of his works were subsequently praised for "reviv[ing] the historical image of what actually occurred," others were criticised for their "lack of realism" (34). Similarly, multiple historians were consulted in relation to the House of Lords fresco in order to avoid "historical inaccuracy" (60-61). In her accounts of these episodes, Gribling seems to be gesturing towards the growth of empiricist history in the tradition of Leopold von Ranke; this would appear, from her evidence, to have been a fraught and contested process. Clearly, Georgian and Victorian uses of the Black Prince are a rich seam, providing insight into more issues than even Gribling's abundant study has yet exhausted.

KIT HEYAM
University of Leeds