

From Lydgate to Shakespeare: George Ferrers and the Historian as Moral Compass

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Essay

In or around the year 1595, playwright William Shakespeare wrote the historical tragedy *Richard II*, the chronological starting point for a series of historical plays that culminates with another, better known historical tragedy *Richard III*. The historical sources Shakespeare consulted to fashion the character of Richard II and a procession of English kings from Henry IV to Richard III included the chronicles of Edward Hall and Raphael Holinshed, as well as the immensely popular *The Mirror For Magistrates*, which covered the exact same chronological range of Shakespeare's Ricardian and Henrician historical plays. While Hall's and Holinshed's works were mostly straightforward prose narratives, *The Mirror* was a collaborative poetic history, which enjoyed several print editions over the course of Elizabeth I's reign. Subjects in *The Mirror* appear as ghosts to tell their woeful tales of how they rose so high only to fall so hard, a device frequently employed in a number of Shakespeare's plays, including *Richard III*.

Among the various contributors to *The Mirror for Magistrates* was a gentleman by the name of George Ferrers. While it is highly unlikely that Shakespeare and Ferrers ever met—indeed, Shakespeare was only 15 when Ferrers died in 1579 at the ripe old age of 69. It is much more certain that Shakespeare was acquainted with Ferrers' literary works. Indeed, *The Mirror* opens with Ferrers' poem on Robert Tresilian, Richard II's corrupt chief justice. The poem questions a subject's duty to obey the demands of a tyrannous king, and it suggests that rebellion against an unjust monarch could be justified, themes also touched upon in *Richard II* and many other of Shakespeare's historical plays(*A Mirror For*

Magistrates aiii-bi).

Queen Elizabeth I was well aware of the political ramifications pregnant in Shakespeare's *Richard II* play, and she was not amused; according to a well-known anecdote, she remarked to William Lambarde, "I am Richard II, know ye not that?" (Kantorwicz 41). Shakespeare, who never exhibited any desire to engage in national politics, had no ostensible reason to suggest that Elizabeth should be tossed off her throne. What he *was* doing was what had by then become a long and grand tradition within the European Renaissance, usually called the *de casibus* tradition, which used history as a means to provide commentary on contemporary political events. This tradition allowed historians, poets, and dramatists to play the role of moral compass for their contemporaries and to point the way to a more ethical and moral society (Budra, *passim*).

So, historically, where does this tradition start? In the beginning, there was the original Renaissance man, Francesco Petrarca, or Petrarch (1304-1374), who scaled the heights of literary immortality, and Mt. Ventoux, as he made his way from medieval certitude towards Renaissance self-reflection. Often considered the first professional writer, Petrarch nonetheless was constrained for much of his professional life to serve as a papal diplomat as he simultaneously endeavored to achieve an individualized artistic and moral autonomy. Petrarch in turn bequeathed to his friend and colleague Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) the idea for the work *De Casibus virorum illustrium*, a poetic history whose purpose was to illustrate the perils that often accompanied what Machiavelli later termed *fortuna*, describing the fates of famous personages from Adam and Eve to Rosamund, Queen of the Lombards, as a warning to princes and noblemen to rule wisely and justly.

Boccaccio's work, in turn, was inordinately influential upon the worldly and cosmopolitan Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400), who imported the forms of the Italian Renaissance to the enchanted Island of Britain, where they took root and flourished. As Chaucer transformed Boccaccio's *Decameron* into *The Canterbury Tales*, he also managed to insert a mini version of the *De Casibus* into the *Tales* in the form of "The Monk's Tale," a double homage to the Italian poet who invented what had become the *de casibus* tradition (Chaucer 562-595). Like his Italian progenitors, Chaucer also required employment, and obtained it in a myriad of ways from the

illustrious royal house of Plantagenet and the ducal house of Lancaster. It was during the 1380s, however, when his patron, John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, was estranged from the teenaged Richard II and absent from England, that Chaucer endured a spate of unemployment that gave him the leisure time to write his most famous literary work. Two centuries later George Ferrers would also enjoy a number of diverse occupations before encountering a remarkably similar state of unemployment, and employed it in the exact same fashion as Chaucer, as Shakespeare himself would later do during waves of plague that closed the London theatres.

Chaucer in turn towered artistically over his and the next generations of historian/poets, such as John Gower, Thomas Hoccleve, and John Lydgate. As John Gower employed his muse to comment upon the instabilities and violence of Richard II's later reign, the Lancastrian dynasty employed John Lydgate for its own political purposes. The resulting tension animated Lydgate's works, such as *The Fall of Princes*, itself based on Boccaccio's *De Casibus*, as Lydgate sought to gratify his patron, the Lancastrian prince Humphrey duke of Gloucester, while simultaneously seeking the hallowed ground of an autonomous artistic agency (Mortimer *passim*). Lydgate was also adept at providing linguistic turns of phrase, such as the saying "needs must" ("He must nedys go that the deuell dryves" in *Assembly of Gods*) which filtered down to Shakespeare, who employed it in *Alls Well That Ends Well*.

It shall be suggested here that the literary career of the charismatic and provocative George Ferrers (1510-1579) provides the conceptual bridge between Lydgate and Shakespeare, as the *de casibus* tradition evolved from manuscript forms of poetic history intended for an aristocratic audience to a genre outfitted for mass appeal on both the printed page and the stage. Ferrers is an obscure literary figure today, although in his day he achieved both fame and notoriety in a variety of historical and literary contexts. In fact, because his myriad achievements are so compartmentalized, the study of his life and career requires, if not demands, an imaginative and comprehensive interdisciplinary approach. For instance, cultural historians are quite familiar with Ferrers' momentous "reign" as "lord of misrule" over the final two Christmas courts held by the teenaged Tudor King Edward VI in 1551/52 and 1552/53, while sixteenth century English literary

scholars know him as a contributor to the aforementioned *The Mirror for Magistrates*, as well as one of the authors of the numerous oratories presented to Elizabeth during her memorable visit to Kenilworth Castle in 1575. Political and constitutional historians are acquainted with Ferrers as the translator of the first English language version of *Magna Carta*, and as the catalyst, while serving as a member of Parliament for Plymouth, for Henry VIII's famous pronouncement on the theoretical relationship between king and parliament in 1542 (Holinshed 824-826).

For all these accomplishments, Ferrers is remembered today chiefly for his contributions to *The Mirror for Magistrates*. In writing this collaborative piece, Ferrers and his fellow contributors, William Baldwin, Thomas Chaloner, Thomas Churchyard, and Thomas Phaer, followed closely in the footsteps of Lydgate. *The Mirror* was conceptualized as a continuation of Lydgate's *The Fall of Princes*, in its use of poetry as the medium to deploy history as a warning to contemporaries what befalls those who neglect their duties as magistrates. Yet Ferrers reportedly also wrote histories, poetry and stage plays, and occasionally performed them as well, providing a multi-faceted model for Shakespeare to have modeled portions of his own career path upon (Meres 85; Lewis 240-241; Bindoff 131).

The first point of comparison is their social origins. Ferrers, like Shakespeare, was a textbook Renaissance "self-fashioner," who, in the words of Stephen Greenblatt, "Moved out of a narrowly circumscribed social sphere and into a realm that brought them in close contact with the powerful and the great" (Greenblatt, *Self-Fashioning* 1-9). Both were distantly related to various noble families, but in their immediate social origins were firmly in the "middling" grades of the gentry. For Ferrers, as for Shakespeare, the road out of provincial obscurity led to the metropolis of London and the Inns of Court. After graduating from Cambridge, where in 1531 he received a bachelor's degree in Canon Law, Ferrers was admitted to Lincoln's Inn in 1534. It may have been while in residence at Lincoln's Inn that Ferrers acquired experience as an entertainer during the various festivities that all the Inns of Courts staged for the numerous holidays of the Christian calendar (Elton 106; Hutson 7; Raffield 2-26). While Shakespeare never attended either Oxford or Cambridge, or became a member of any of the London Inns of Court, his plays are peppered liberally with

legal jargon, betraying a close affinity to the legal profession and the men who practiced its arts. As Peter Ackroyd has observed, "The connection between the legal Inns and the drama is a very close one"(232).

From 1531 to the fall of 1554, when he was first appointed "lord of misrule," Ferrers lived the exciting and well-rounded life of a Tudor Renaissance gentleman. Following his graduation from Cambridge in 1531 with a B.A. in Canon law, Ferrers combined his legal training with his keen historical interests by contributing to a published translation of English statutes, and the publication of his own translation of *Magna Carta* in 1534. Like the Bible, neither *Magna Carta* nor parliamentary statutes had been previously available in English language versions; given the considerable jurisdictional and administrative transformations that Tudor government was undergoing, Ferrers's efforts constitute a timely historical reminder of England's medieval constitutional legacy at a moment of rather rapid historical change. Ferrers's intellectual and legal talents brought him to the attention of Thomas Cromwell, secretary to Henry VIII's Privy Council, whose ministerial household he entered in the mid 1530s (Robertson, 310). Ferrers survived Cromwell's fall in 1540, and later served as a page in Henry VIII's Privy Chamber. But Ferrers also had political ambitions. In 1542, Ferrers was elected member of The House of Commons for Plymouth, the beginning of a long but intermittent and relatively undistinguished parliamentary career (Hasler 114-115).¹ Ferrers was also a soldier and saw action under Henry VIII during the king's final military campaign in France, which resulted in the capture of Bolougne (1544) as well as in the 1547 "rough wooing" campaign in Scotland under the Duke of Somerset.

Like his son and successor Edward VI, Henry VIII was quite fond of Ferrers. He left him 100 marks in his will. Indeed, most, but not all, contemporary observers agreed that Ferrers was both charismatic and entertaining. The favor of these two kings eventually enabled Ferrers to accumulate a considerable estate in Hertfordshire, land made available for grant and/or purchase by the dissolution of England's monasteries in the last two decades of

¹ Ferrers sat for Plymouth in 1542, 1545, and 1553, Cirencester in 1547, Branstaple in 1554, Brackley in 1554-1555, and St. Albans in 1571.

Henry VIII's reign. Ferrers exploited his landed estates with an exacting management style. As popular as Ferrers became with high ranking members of the Tudor ruling classes, the people that he chose to share the sunny side of his personality with seems to have been decided along class lines. Ferrers may have charmed Henry VIII, Edward VI, the dukes of Somerset and Northumberland; even Mary Tudor was not totally immune. Court records tell us that Ferrers obviously saw no purpose in courting the favor of or enjoying the esteem of the tenants who worked and lived upon his estates, one of whom referred to him as "a covetous man and ill to deal withal" (Bindoff 131).

The explanation for Ferrers' Janus—like personality may lie with his particular career motivations, which place him uniquely within the *De Casibus* tradition. Despite his legal training, Ferrers was unlike his contemporaries Ralph Sadler, William Cecil and Nicholas Bacon, in that he never revealed any desire to pursue employment in royal government, despite his proximity to the font of power. Life at the epicenter of the Tudor royal court could often be fatal. Ferrers witnessed the tragic fall of patrons such as Cromwell and Somerset, and possibly as a result, he was more interested in creating a sufficient landed income to create for himself the circumstances to pursue his creative and academic muse without the "day jobs" that Renaissance figures from Petrarch to Lydgate were constrained to take in order to fund their literary endeavors. Instead, Ferrers preferred life as a big fish in the small pond of Hertfordshire, where he held local offices, most importantly as a justice of the peace, and wielded considerable power, as Shakespeare maintained his ties to Stratford-On-Avon, where he also eventually retired after a successful real estate career that paralleled his literary one.

During the reign of Edward VI (1547-1553), forty years before Shakespeare made his own debut in the theatrical world of Elizabethan London, Ferrers emerged as a literary and theatrical artist in London. In fact, Ferrers' reign as 'lord of misrule' was his debut in this particular line of work. It constituted his most famous historical performance. Historically, holiday lords of misrule were staples for the holiday calendars of the Inns of Court, where Ferrers undoubtedly gained the experience for his performance as a mock king (Billington 31-40). But Ferrers hardly played the role of a buffoon; a man conversant in both courtier and

intellectual circles, he was the perfect choice to devise the entertainments for such a discerning patron as the superbly educated and militantly Protestant Edward VI. According to historian Richard Grafton, Ferrers was "a gentleman both wise and learned" who provided highly entertaining interludes that combined humanist Renaissance imagery and topics with breathtaking spectacle and bawdy humor with just the right touch of Edwardian Protestant political correctness, a combination that, with its satirical anti-Catholic presentations, greatly offended the ambassador of the Catholic Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (Grafton 526-527; *Calendar* 444). Ferrers was assisted in writing the pastimes by a coterie of other learned men, William Baldwin, and the Chaloners brothers Thomas and Francis, and clearly enjoyed the creative processes behind devising Christmas entertainments, which complemented the scholarly tone of Edward's royal court, but Ferrers was above all, like Shakespeare, also a performer (King 180). In his later work, *Beware of the Cat*, Baldwin provided anecdotes describing Ferrers's humorous, easy going manner, revealing a man who clearly enjoyed writing works of artistic and intellectual discretion (Baldwin 26-28).

Ferrers was just as serious about producing his entertainments as he was writing them. Among the papers in the Loseley manuscripts are numerous letters from Ferrers to the hapless Thomas Cawarden, master of the revels, ordering costumes and complaining about their quality and the time it took to make them; George Ferrers was an impatient man, and John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland and *de facto* regent for Edward VI's minority government, shared his impatience (Streitberger 194-204). Nevertheless, Ferrers's painstaking attention to detail resulted in an extravaganza unrivaled in the annals of Tudor political public performance (Loades 113). According to diarist Henry Machyn, on 4 January 1552, Ferrers rode through London in regal style, followed by a train of attendants who sparkled like peacocks as they enjoyed the adoration of the Londoners (Machyn 13). Ferrers' fame from this performance was still potent thirty years later, as historian John Stow vividly described the river journey, at the conclusion of the Christmas festivities, as he returned to Edward's royal court at Greenwich, loaded down with a silver goblet, and wine, and a reputation that celebrated a scholar who was also a quintessential gentleman. According to Stow,

and so departed to the tower wharffe againe,
and to the courte by water,
to the great commendation of the maior and alderman,
and highly accepted of the King and Councell.
(1055)

Ferrers returned the following year for an encore performance as "lord of misrule," assaulting Cawarden once again with requests for costumes for a divine, a philosopher, an astronomer, a poet, a physician, an apothecary, and various clowns, jugglers, and friars (Feuillerat 95). All this sounds like an early modern form of vaudeville with a Calvinist edge, or the cast of a Shakespeare comedy, but the reviews for the second Christmas were as positive as they had been for the first, and Edward's court apparently continued to employ Ferrers and his cohorts for entertainments beyond the conclusion of the Christmas festivities (*Acts* 210).

Following king Edward's tragic death in July 1553 at the age of 15, and the accession of the militantly Catholic Mary I, Ferrers found himself in a position remarkably similar to Chaucer's in the mid 1380s. He was jobless and therefore had the leisure time to write his most famous work of literature. It seems more than ironic that Ferrers began contributing to the work, originally titled *A Memorial of Suche Princes*, that later became *The Mirror For Magistrates*, at the precise moment he stopped being a magistrate, when Mary's government terminated his tenure as Justice of the Peace for Hertfordshire in 1554 (see Appendix A in Lucas, *Tragic*). The impetus for this literary/historical project came from Ferrers' friend and collaborator William Baldwin. It was ostensibly a continuation of John Lydgate's fifteenth century poetic history *The Fall of Princes*, which included descriptions of late fourteenth- to late fifteenth-century historical figures, whose moral failings were meant to serve as warnings to contemporary political figures (Budra 1-93). Indeed, the very first chapter of this work was Ferrers's dirge on the lamentable legal career of Robert Tresilian, who furthered the disreputable legal goals of the uncontrollable minority king Richard II, only to later suffer death at the hands of the Merciless Parliament of 1388 (*Mirror* aiii-bi). As both Lily Campbell and Scott Lucas have argued, *A Memorial of Suche Princes* was actually a politically charged critique of both Edward VI's

minority regime and Mary I's subsequent reign; Mary's Lord Chancellor Stephen Gardiner suppressed it just as it was coming off the press (Campbell 119-155; Lucas, "Consolation" 44-70). Given the fact that Ferrers had hitherto displayed conspicuous loyalty to Mary's regime, particularly during the Wyatt revolt of early 1554, when he fought bravely for the Queen, it seems that the only plausible explanation for Ferrers' loss of his Justice of the Peace commission was his involvement in the abortive *A Memorial of Suche Princes* project, in which he seemingly traded his own magistracy to write about historical magistracies as cautionary tales for his own contemporaries (Winston 381-400). Indeed, Ferrers may very well have been describing his own experience in his Tresilian piece for the 1559 version of *The Mirror*, when he lamented that "The fauour of a prince is an vntrusty staye / But Iustyce hath a fee that shall remain alwaye" (Ferrers, *Mirror*, bi). And Ferrers may well have been calling himself to task for supporting the Marian legislation with the verses that conclude this piece:

If sum in latter days, had called vnto mynde
The fatall fall of vs for wresting of the right
The statutes of this lande they should not haue defynde
So wylfully and wittingly against the sentence quyte:
But though they skaped paine, the falte was nothing lyght:
Let them that cum hereafter both that and this compare,
And waying well the ende, they wyll I trust beware
(*Mirror* bi).

Despite the loss of his magistracy, Ferrers did possess a golden parachute of sorts that allowed him to speak his conscience in his writings, without recourse to employment either in the royal court or government. As we have seen, like so many other members of the gentry class, Ferrers had profited handsomely from the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII, which, combined with a series of advantageous marriages, created for him a profitable landed estate in Hertfordshire, which he exploited with an exacting, proto-capitalist management style. Indeed, Ferrers' principle occupation during Elizabeth's reign was composing works of scholarship, writing poetry (most of which is now lost), and contributing to various editions of *A Memorial of Suche Princes*,

rechristened *The Mirror for Magistrates*, which finally appeared in 1559, and subsequently in 1563, 1574, and 1578, with additional contributions from Ferrers. His contributions to the *Mirror* were, in fact, the most durable of his literary accomplishments, a work much read over the entire duration of early modern English history, and one that has been frequently analyzed by literary scholars (Trench 71-88). As Paul Budra has observed, "There is something dramatic, or, rather, theatrical, about the composition of the Baldwin edited versions of *The Mirror*" (74). Like the ghosts who abound in so many of Shakespeare's plays, the subjects of *The Mirror* also appear as apparitions, speaking in the first person to Baldwin to tell their tales of woe, caused primarily by their lack of scruple and conscience as they executed the various magisterial offices from which they fell so hard.

As we have seen, *The Mirror* only saw the light of day in 1559, the year following Elizabeth's accession, and long after Ferrers himself had enjoyed any form of magistracy. Ferrers, in fact, appeared to have chosen literary autonomy over success at court or employment in government, the same *yin* and *yang* of his precursors in the *de casibus* tradition, as witnessed by his sudden reversal of fortune under Mary, which was probably caused by his involvement in the abortive *A Memorial of Suche Princes* project (Meyer-Lee, *passim*). Nevertheless, he achieved the dream of Lydgate and Hoccleve, whose quest for literary autonomy was hampered by their need to satisfy the agendas of their noble patrons.

While Ferrers never received any patronage from Elizabeth, his lofty poetry did reach her ears as she entered Kenilworth on the evening of 9 July 1575 for a fabulous, nineteen day party thrown for her by royal favorite Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. As the queen entered the castle grounds, she was met by a big, strong, buff Hercules, who, "dazzled by the rare beauty and princely countenance of her majesty," immediately surrendered custody of the castle into her charge. As Elizabeth then walked through the gate into the base court, a lady and two attendants began to careen across a pool as if walking on water, conveyed either by a raft or a moveable island. It was the lady of the island, king Arthur's lady of the lake. The words George Ferrers composed for the lady's address was both poetry and history, as it described how she had persevered through Anglo-Saxons, Danes, Normans, and Plantagenets, concluding with the statement, "The lake, the lodge,

the lord, are yours to command" (Gascoigne 3).

Elizabeth immediately responded to the lady's oration, remarking, "We had thought indeed the lake had been ours, and do you call it yours now? Well, we will herein common more with you hereafter."² It is, of course, impossible to determine whether Elizabeth was aware of the identity of the author of the oration. However, Leicester had chosen the right man to compose an oration that smacked of oblique historical references employed to bolster his own ambitious agenda that lay at the heart of the festivities regaling the Queen at Kenilworth. Indeed, if Ferrers had any ambitions about enjoying the personal favor of Elizabeth as he had enjoyed from Henry VIII and Edward VI, this was as close as he came. What Ferrers might have come closer to, as Stephen Greenblatt and Peter Ackroyd have suggested, is the possibility that the eleven year old William Shakespeare may have been present for the Kenilworth festivities, and heard the performance of the lady of the lake's oration (Ackroyd 62; Greenblatt, *Will* 42-53). It is just a conjecture, as is the idea that Ferrers himself may also have been present at Kenilworth.

Ferrers lived only three and a half years beyond his ultimate Elizabethan moment. Another edition of the *Mirror for Magistrates* appeared in 1578, this time with essays on the fifteenth century Humphrey, duke of Gloucester and his notorious wife Eleanor Cobham, stories that later found their way into Shakespeare's *Henry VI* plays. The following January Ferrers died, presumably peacefully in his own bed. His career presented an astonishing case of an historical actor who clearly demonstrated the art of the possible that both the English Reformation and the English Renaissance provided, a serious scholar who loved fun, pageantry and entertainment, a lawyer who loved history, poetry and the arts of war, and a courtier who forsook public office to pursue his muse. He was a man who would have undoubtedly held great appeal to the bard of Avon, as he helped clear the path for Shakespeare's own celebrated journey to literary immortality.

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² See Nichols 420-523) for the complete account.

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