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Perkin

Ann Wroe

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PERKIN

A Story of Deception

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Introduction

The story of Perkin Warbeck is, or used to be, one of the most compelling mysteries of English history. It is the story of a young man who claimed to be Richard of York, the younger of the Princes in the Tower, risen from the dead, or almost dead. As such, he tormented Henry VII for eight years. He emerged in Ireland in 1491, to be honoured and protected by the courts of France, Burgundy, the Empire and Scotland. He tried three times to invade England, sometimes eluding capture only by the skin of his teeth. He was a political pawn, and also the most keenly sought diplomatic prize in Europe. He behaved as a prince and was married to an earl's daughter, but was officially proclaimed to be – and apparently, in custody, confessed he was – a boatman's son.

Many believed he was a prince; others did not, or merely pretended to. Some believed that he was Perkin Warbeck, the name that eventually settled on him; others never could. Many, perhaps most, neither knew nor cared. Instead, they used him. The greatest European rulers of the age – the Emperor Maximilian, Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, Charles VIII of France – employed him for their own purposes. All who dealt with him gave him the identity they wished him to have: either the Duke of York, or a jumped-up lad from Flanders. It is possible that he was neither. It is also possible that, by the end, even he did not know who he really was.

This book's first purpose, therefore, is to tell again a marvellous tale that seems on the brink of being forgotten. Its second purpose is to dissect, and call in question, the official cover-story. Modern cover-stories leave cracks,

computer messages, phone logs, by which they betray their nature. Very old cover-stories acquire a patina of age and settle into history. So it is with Perkin's confession, which – though largely ignored at the time – is now accepted as true by almost all respectable historians. James Gairdner, the finest fifteenth-century historian of the Victorian age, effected that change by first linking the family details given in the confession to documents in the archives of Tournai, in Belgium. Henry VII hadn't made this family up; so his rival must have been, indeed, just a boatman's boy, cajoled into being a prince (as the confession said) by a group of dissaffected Yorkists in Ireland. And that was the end of the story. Most historians of the period now treat Perkin with a certain impatience, as a colourful but tiresome diversion on the way to the Triumph of the Tudors. He sparkles for a time but soon fades away, amusing and inconsequential.

Those who look closely find a picture that is deeply perplexing. This young man caused far more trouble, and more nearly upended Henry, than he is usually given credit for. Though he was allegedly attempting an astonishing trick – trying, as a low-born foreigner, to get the throne of England – he proved very hard either to deflate or to expose. The main players, including Henry, behaved towards him in ways that are often hard to explain. Beyond this, the Tournai family was never linked properly to Henry's captive, nor he to them. Much does not fit into the neat parameters of the official confession, and never has. A different story, perhaps a surprising one, may have been unfolding here. The truth lies somewhere in the details.

Yet catching this character is notoriously hard. He was known to be ungraspable in his own time, like quicksilver or a shooting star. It is possible that no one has captured him except John Ford, whose wonderful play portrays an impostor-prince who believes so completely in his own majesty that he is, in effect, the person he claims to be. In the febrile, casually mendacious and highly coloured world

of the late fifteenth century, this young man is almost the perfect examplar of his time. To write his life, therefore, requires exploring not just late-fifteenth-century politics and diplomacy, but late-fifteenth-century ways of seeing, deceiving and understanding.

Much of this involves putting him in the roles people gave him, or which he gave himself. He was an adventurer, an inveterate wanderer, when real adventuring was prising open the closed husk of the medieval globe. He was a lost prince, at a time when lost kings of all kinds were keenly invoked and regretted. He was a consummate performer, in a world where pageant and display were paramount. He was, as he himself said, Fortune's victim, in an age when all men and women felt the rush of her wheel propelling them to greatness or nothingness. And he was – in one character or another, or both – a deceiver, in a whole world of false appearances. If we look at him in all these roles, as people of the time observed and judged him, we may get a little closer to knowing who he was.

And yet, in the end, the aim of this book is not to stick a name on him. On the contrary, it is almost the opposite: to free him from the tyranny of forced identities. The name 'Perkin' is used in these pages only when people would have used it of him, and not otherwise. Thomas Gainsford, whose account of 1618 did so much to make him at the same time lurid and pathetic, was the first to grapple with the idea that his biographers had to use all his names, in all their multiplicity, and then get past them. 'Whether I name [him] Peter, or Perkin, or Warbeck, or Prince, or Richard Duke of York, or Richard the Fourth,' he wrote, 'all is one Man and all had one End.' Gainsford was right. My subject was all these people and, in the deepest sense, none of them.

I sometimes felt as I wrote that this book is not so much about one man as about the human soul: about the 'I' that exists apart from the names we are given, the family we acquire or the titles we aspire to. The concept is dimmer to

us than it would have been to him. Medieval people pictured the soul as a naked miniature of themselves which, after death, left the body like a candle flame. It glimmered a little in life, and you tried to detect it, but it was hard to catch. Beneath everything that was fastened on this young man, by himself and by others, lay his true self, which was not touched or changed. In the course of retelling and re-examining the story of his life, I hope this book may also uncover a little of that.

A note on spellings

Since many, or most, of the quotations in this book are translated from other languages into modern English, I have also modernised the spelling of the quotations from English sources. The phrasing, punctuation and capitalisation are unaltered, which should preserve the ‘feel’. In quotations from Scots, I have deliberately left some words (e.g. ‘nae’, rather than ‘no’) which allow us to hear the accent; and I have preserved William Dunbar in his full glory.

Quotations in foreign languages have been left in the original spelling. This means, in the case of French, that accents do not appear on quotations from manuscript sources (where accents were not used), but do appear on quotations from sources that we know from edited and printed editions (Chastellain, Commines, Molinet). This is inconsistent, I realise, but the alternative would have been to modernise throughout for all languages, and I did not feel I was up to the task.

Prologue: Presence

Face to face, the two men sat at the window. One was an artist; you could see this from his drab workaday gown, the tablet he held and the way, from long habit, the chalk or metalpoint nestled in his hand. The formalities had been concluded: he had doffed his hat and, holding it to his chest as etiquette required, had knelt to his subject with a few soft words of greeting. Now, as carefully as he might without touching or outraging him, he was overseeing the way he sat and appraising the light that fell on him.

The young man who faced him was a prince. You could tell this from his clothes: a long gown of cloth-of-gold trimmed with fur, a surcoat of cloth-of-silver, a shirt of exquisite linen and, arranged on his shoulders, chains of briquettes of gold. His black velvet hat bore a brooch set with one large jewel and finished with three pendant pearls. Attendants hovered by to hold his gloves, move his chair or, at a nod or lift of a finger, take some murmured message from him. No more credentials were required of him for the moment. These were enough.

His name was already famous. This, as far as the artist knew, was Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York, the second son of Edward IV, late King of England. He claimed to be the rightful heir to the throne now held by Henry VII, and the hoped-for restorer of his father’s line. He had been thought dead, murdered as a child with his child-brother in the Tower of London, but now he was alive. He was here, and you could touch him, if you dared touch a young man who was both a prince and a sign of God’s miraculous power.

The encounter probably occurred in Malines or Dendermonde in the Burgundian Netherlands, in one of the palaces where the prince was staying as the guest and

protégé of his aunt Margaret of York, Duchess of Burgundy. The date was probably the autumn of 1494, though it is not known for certain. Columbus's caravels had already reached, and returned from, the islands east of Cipango across the West Sea. The thrones of France, England and the Empire were occupied respectively by Charles VIII, Henry VII and Maximilian, each in a state of advanced suspicion of the others. Plague had ravaged the western parts of the Empire, and had been followed by a spring so cold, under the domination of Saturn and the moon, that vines had frozen and cherry-blossoms had turned to ice on the trees. In London, Nantwich salt was selling for 6d. a bushel and white herring for 2s. 8d. a cord, and an old woman had been burned at Smithfield for nine articles of heresy. The world was composed of nine spheres, nine companies of angels, seven planetary influences, five earthly zones, four elements, four states of existence, four humours (yellow bile, black bile, phlegm, blood) and, at the apex, the perfection of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

So the two sat, and looked at each other. The prince's gaze was still, the artist's quick, darting from his subject to the sheet of paper he held before him, steadied on a book or a block of wood. The artist's stool was low, the chair of the prince set higher. It could not have been otherwise, for the degrees of social separation had to be preserved. That separation extended to their sense of time as they sat there: the artist's expendable, the prince's precious, belonging to a higher life.

Yet the artist and the young man before him were perhaps more similar than they appeared. Both were engaged in the making of works of art: the prince *princiant*, proving his high nobility by elegance and presence, and the artist endeavouring to show, by sheer skill, that he could make a counterfeit that would live. A counterfeit, as both he and the

prince understood it, was a true image, a copy so exact that it could take the place of the living person or the real thing. As a mirror trapped a perfect reflection, so the frame of this portrait could catch the subject in perfect similitude, so lifelike that the figure appeared to breathe, the silk to shimmer and the fur to sink under the hand. Kissing this counterfeit – as you would want to kiss it, or prop it next to you at table – your lips would surely brush living flesh, slightly rough and warm. This mouth, like a mouth in the mirror, could perhaps form words; the hands could move, in their heavy sleeves, in a gesture of courtesy; tears could steal from the subject's eyes, wet to the touch on the painted wood. A master-painter could move you deeply with a counterfeit such as this.

He would use all kinds of trickery to achieve his effects, as artists were known to do. In common parlance, to 'paint' meant to feign; a 'colour' was a fiction, an allegory or, at worst, a plain lie, built on a ground of oily untruth as a painter established his colour on the wood. The secret of the best pigments was sometimes common filth, as when urine, lye and alum mixed with powdered brazil wood made the colour of a red rose, or when lumps of soot and lye made a beautiful bright wash for the painting of a young girl's hair. Some artists knew, too, about the artificial yellow that could simulate gold, or how to make pretended gold leaf from varnish and Greek pitch crushed in oil. Many a 'masterpiece' relied on such techniques. One writer of a painter's guide boasted that he knew how to make 'a beautiful ivory which can take a polish and is white and even more lovely than real ivory'. Lovelier than the real: the ideal of works of art.

There were many who would say, in the years to come, that Richard Plantagenet was just such a masterpiece: cut from the block in Tournai, sculpted and painted in Burgundy, and then exhibited everywhere. 'A curious piece of marble', Francis Bacon called him. The same verb, *effingere*, was applied to his alleged makers as was used for painting and

sculpting in the ordinary way: as if, from wood or silver or white limestone, they had moulded a compelling human form. Nature was easily and busily imitated by those who knew how. At Margaret of York's main wedding feast, in 1468, dry deserts were made of silk and buckram, the waves of the sea of silver-painted wood, and the growing grass of wax: all done 'from life' and 'as lifelike as possible', although this static and shining beauty was nothing but artificers' work. The painted funerary image of Charles VIII in 1498 was so well done, wrote the chronicler Jean Molinet, 'by subtle art and exquisite pictures, that he seemed actually resuscitated, full of spirit and life'. Such skill could no doubt be applied to the making of princes, too.

He sat now with his gold robes falling round him. To gather from those who observed him, he was not particularly tall. Any presence he had did not come from that. Maximilian, who first met him when he was about twenty, called him 'a young boy', *ains Jungen knaben*, and Henry VII first described him, two years or so before this portrait, as 'the Child'. The word 'boy', fixed on him by his enemies, meant first of all a churl and a rascal. Yet it also suggested someone suited to diminutives, as well as to manipulation by those who were older and wiser. Both Bacon, writing his story in the 1620s, and Edward Hall, recording it in the 1540s, called him a doll: played with, fought over, carried about, dressed up.

Contemporaries also found two stranger words to describe him. Robert Fabyan, a London alderman who first saw him when he was about twenty-three, called him 'this unhappy Imp'. The word, usually applied to innocent children, seemed peculiar for a man in adulthood who was, by then, married. It also suggested other images: an urchin, a devil-child, or a creature small enough to hide inside a pitcher or cling to a man's cloak, chattering and harrying him.

The second word was more bizarre. It was used by Bernard André, Henry VII's poet laureate and 'royal

historiographer', who was blind and never saw the man he was describing. Possibly, then, it came from the circle of the king himself. Recording the campaign in 1497 to drive this presumptuous invader out of the West Country, André referred in passing to *Cornubii . . . unacum papilione suo*, 'the Cornishmen and their butterfly'. Smallness, lightness, effeminacy and, in William Caxton's version of *The King's Book*, printed ten years before, falseness too. 'The liar fareth as a butterfly, that liveth in the air and hath nothing in her guts but wind, and at every colour that she sees changeth her own.'

He was certainly embellished, as his age and his station required. Fashion dictated that a young prince in the early 1490s should wear precisely these clothes. He was, and remained, at the cutting edge of elegance. When he was taken up by James IV of Scotland, the king paid for 'a great coat of the new fashion to the Prince, with sleeves', and for black hose daringly striped with purple in the French style, the only style worth following. (James had white hose striped with green.) In Stirling at Easter 1496 the prince and his patron, young fellow-dandies, indulged in new hats and fresh lacings for their shirts. Even their underclothes were new, tied up with new ribbons tipped with bright silver tags, as they processed at Mass together.

Now, as he sat for his portrait, every detail cried the latest look. The angle of his hat was exactly judged; it was not last year's. The neck-opening of his surcoat, one side pleated, the other plain, was unquestionably 'the new guise', or 'the new jet', as he himself would have put it. Cloth-of-gold was the fabric of choice among the tiny elite who qualified to wear it. Silver and gold robes together, as this young man wore them, were the 'royalest' advertisement of nobility. Gold chains, the more the better, were so important that in 1491 the Milanese ambassador in France described those worn by the Scottish envoys before he mentioned their horses or their robes. A chain worth £1,000 or more was not

uncommon among a king's chief officers. Their value was known and flaunted. Richard Plantagenet wore two long chains carefully arranged in a pattern; the longer one seemed to cross on his chest and may have fallen as far as his waist. Cross-bracing of this sort, like cross-lacing, was almost aggressively up to date.

Just as fashionably, his blond hair had been brushed to fall in full regular waves to his shoulders. In John Skelton's poem 'Magnificence', Courtly Abusion (a hopeless dandy, speaking doggerel French and Flemish) had done this, twirling alone on stage and hoping somebody was watching him:

> My hair busheth
> So pleasantly,
> My robe rusheth
> So ruttingly [dashingly],
> Meseem I fly,
> I am so light
> To dance delight.

'Nesh' was the word for hair like this. A physiognomist, skilled in the science of looking at faces, would tell you that it meant timidity, like the soft-furred hare that started and ran in the field. Soft skin, too, like a woman's, meant a man who was changeable and fickle, susceptible to movement because the denser vapours did not settle in him. The neshness of a man's heart, though possibly good soil for God to work in, was more often a feather-bed in which the devil lay, tempting him to delicacy and luxury. It was of course unwise, as Aristotle had told the Emperor Alexander, to read too much into one or two signs. But the tenth sign of timidity was also suggested by the pose Plantagenet had struck: 'overlightly moving of colour and semblant, and have semblant to be pensive, and full of thoughts'.

As a final decorative touch, the prince's hair had been curled into two quiffs, one on either side of his face. It was not a practical design; if he had tried to do anything active,

they would have fallen into his eyes. Some skill would have been needed to achieve this effect. On his first rising, as recommended for princes, his servants would have vigorously washed and rubbed his hair, dispelling the vapours gathered during sleep and unlocking the shutters of the brain. They would next have stretched his hair with hot tongs as he sat by the fire, stiffening it with a sticky paste of resin, egg-white and sulphur, arranging the curls with comb and brush. The freshest gallants fixed them up at night with nets or little presses. Sebastian Brant described the techniques that year in his chapter on Innovations in *The Ship of Fools*, accompanying the printed text with a woodcut of the curled fop, also in wildly cross-laced underwear, gazing at himself in a hand-mirror. Playing with your hair, washing it, trussing and combing it, making it stand out and seem curly, then looking in the glass, were all chief sins of the body that had to be confessed, if you could find a priest handy.

The two fashion-foibles of the age, curling and pleating, were thus exquisitely represented in Richard Plantagenet as he sat there. Such a passion for ‘curiosities’, in Brant’s view, drew the soul away from God. Just as dangerously, it led towards that ‘intricacy of thought’ that tried to construct, like a piece of Flemish needlework, a reasoned explanation for the mysteries of the Incarnation or the Sacrament. Plantagenet may never have considered such questions, but his precious curls were quite enough to raise this suspicion about him. He sat still enough not to disturb them; but had you got close to him, as close as the artist was, you might have sniffed – above the herb-and-rosewater perfumes of his recent bath – a more workaday smell, of scorched hair and sulphur.

The pose he had chosen, too, was deliberate. He held his head at the king’s angle, slightly dipped to the left, as if attending kindly to someone lower than himself. He had possibly assumed this pose quite naturally, as soon as he

sat down. But possibly, too, it had been suggested to him. The look would have been familiar from countless representations, as indeed from his own performances in councils, on balustrades and at formal receptions. It suggested piety, nobility, humility, the benign goodness of the ruling class. The angels, too, had this expression as they gazed on the earth and blessed it in a slightly distant way. It was the ideal look of the age, both in heaven and on earth.

You could call him handsome; most people did, though his bearing impressed them even more. Molinet thought him 'really good-looking', *fort gorgias*, using a word that meant he outshone those around him. The Venetian ambassador to London in 1497 called him *zentil*, 'noble', in manners as in looks. Later chroniclers went further. After the off-hand remark of Polydore Vergil, Henry VII's historian, that the young man was *forma non ineleganti* (probably gleaned from people who had seen him) came the assertions of Hall and his followers that he was 'of visage beautiful, of countenance demure': like the fifteen-year-old Galahad before his knighting, demure as a dove. Beyond this, Bacon wrote, he had 'such a crafty and bewitching fashion both to move pity and to induce belief, as was like a kind of fascination and enchantment to those that saw him or heard him'. The looks and manner together made him *amabilis*, lovely and worthy to be loved.

Taken feature by feature, his face was almost a pastiche of what contemporaries admired. The jaw was strongly moulded, with a cleft in the chin. The mouth was delicate and petulant, absurdly fashionable: the lower lip full, with a slight dinted divide at the centre, the upper lip modelled in a perfect bow, even to the little rise at the edges that suggested the suppression of a smile. The nose was well-shaped and in proportion: a nose like this, 'rather long and turned up a little', was exactly what Louis XI wanted on his tomb effigy, 'the handsomest countenance you can make him', rather than the big hooked article he had in life.

Plantagenet's forehead was high, the brows well shaped, the whole face (smooth and scarcely touched by the razor) regular and open. A sanguine temperament, the physiognomist would have told you: a young man's natural heat fuelled with excess of blood and disposed, especially after wine, to laugh, dance and tumble women. In medical treatises the sanguine man was often drawn in court clothes, for courts were the element in which he thrived. He was associated, too, with air, which gave him, like the butterfly, his vitality and levity.

But there was a flaw. It was noticed in October 1497 by Henry VII's envoy Richmond Herald ('a wise man who noticed everything', according to a colleague). Richmond remarked to the Milanese ambassador that the young man had a defective left eye *que manca un poco da strambre*, which lacked a little brightness. For this reason, he was 'not handsome', whatever the assumptions that had gone before. Like his beauty, this defect too passed into the folk memory of him. Bacon's description of his last debacle, when he began to 'squint one eye upon the crown and another upon the sanctuary', suggested that the strangeness of his left eye was widely known, though only Richmond's observation preserves it in writing.

That eye would have been the next thing the artist noticed, once the general impression of brilliance had settled. Neither the shape nor the colour of this eye resembled the other, and the gaze was slightly misdirected. The upper lid was creased above it, and under the lower lid, near the nose, was a mark that might have been a scar. Some accident, perhaps, had caused these things, or else he had been born with them. The eye did not seem blind, but its opacity suggested that his vision was dulled. Richmond was right to notice the lack of brightness in it. The artist too, as he drew, could do little to invest it with life. Plantagenet had turned his good side towards him,

naturally enough, but the light from the window therefore fell on the most unsettling thing about him.

When faced with contradictory signs in a man, you judged him by his eyes, ‘for they be most true and provable’. Strange eyes were dangerous, and could not be trusted. When a maiden of India with speckled eyes was sent once to Alexander, he found she had been suckled on poison that had invisibly envenomed her. A film upon the eye could imply blindness that was spiritual rather than physical: an insufficient knowledge of the Creed, or a poor appreciation that the beauties of the world were not lasting.

Eyes of two different lights or colours were even more disturbing. They accounted perhaps for the *veneficium*, the powers of hazardous bewitchment, that Bacon attributed to this young man. Philosophers taught that understanding and affection were represented by the right eye and the left respectively. If these were not in balance, ‘due and beauteous proportion’ was offended. When the body politic was thus disordered, the right eye drew up statutes and the left perverted their meaning; the right offered justice, but the left accepted false information; the right made sincere and eloquent promises, while the left did nothing to fulfil them. A look that was ‘single and not turned to doubleness’ made the body ‘fair and light’. A double look led to darkness.

You might ask, then (if it was your place to ask), whether this young man was bound for the light or the dark. For the moment, evidently, he was enthroned in hope, but it might not last. Fortune clearly favoured him, but her favour was ever likely to be withdrawn again. In fact it was possible to think, as you looked at him, that Fortune herself had dressed him in his exquisite clothes. She had put on him these stiff, heavy, shining robes in which his natural lightness was weighed down with splendour. She had hung about his neck the chains of a status he might have been happier without; and the heavier the chains, the greater the

danger that their sheer weight might crush the life from him. She had placed his hat on his head, giving it a nudge until it was at the very angle worn by Pride, ‘bonet on side’, as he danced in Hell. Then, as a final touch, she had pinned to the brim a brooch so rich that it clearly bore the burden of some sponsor’s expectations. She had him then – until, changing her mind like any pretty girl, she began as teasingly to unbuckle him again.

The original of this portrait has long since vanished. It was copied in the 1560s by Jacques le Boucq, a French herald who was making a collection, for a gentleman of Lille, of portraits of notable people. He made his copies in red chalk or pencil; this was one of his red-chalk sketches, *à la sanguine* in French, as if he sought to reproduce the tints of the living flesh. It was done with great care for detail, as not all his drawings were, and with the colour-notes in full. The result was another version, in effect, of the first sketch done by the artist.

This counterfeit was well done; yet, in the deepest sense, it was not true. Like the mirror-image, it was not the person it represented but was somehow dim, removed and secondary. A counterfeit could thus begin to mismatch life, becoming ill-done and crooked. The word contained both meanings. The counterfeit Excalibur given by Morgan le Fay, the enchantress, to King Arthur looked exactly like his sword, but it was brittle and could not bite steel as Excalibur could. Battle revealed its falseness. Caxton used the word ‘counterfeit’ both for broken walls and bodies curved with age, fine and straight things fallen out of line. In the poetry of Skelton lurked a character, Counterfeit Countenance, who presided over a whole skewed world of false smiles, gestures, documents and claims. In fact, Skelton implied, this was the real world.

Within five years, Skelton was also to size up this prince who now sat so still and dazzling before the artist. He judged him to be barnyard shit, though dressed up like a peacock. Others were less sure. In 1542, Hall, who had never seen him, used ‘counterfeit’ in both its meanings to describe him. This young man, he wrote, ‘kept such a princely countenance, and so counterfeit a majesty royal, that all men in manner did firmly believe that he was extracted of the noble house and family of the dukes of York’. ‘All men’ was Hall’s exaggeration. Yet plenty did believe, or simply did not question; and among them was the artist who was now involved in the task of drawing him.

As he drew, there was a possibility he might uncover the truth of the man before him. He might catch some sense of Plantagenet’s soul, his real and eternal self, in his face. The soul was in essence a miniature of him, from the hairs on his head to the nails on his toes; yet it was also divine, God’s image in him. However lowly a man was, his soul gave him that nobility. Artists showed it innocent, defenceless and naked as a child, ‘his right clearness colour of flowers, brightness of sun, figure of man, pleasant as precious stones’. St Bernard saw it as a white lily-flower, delicate and shining, among the thorns and corruption of the world. It was the motivating part and deep nature of bad men as well as good, and its sensitivity to humours made men what they were. In most men the ‘little soul’ lived closed in the breast, but philosophers taught that it dwelt within the brain, spilling out its fiery virtue sometimes to the heart.

Could this reality be caught in a man as he lived? The best artists of the time tried hard to do so. The body, after all, could not obscure the soul entirely. Gross flesh was not opaque, but like a cloud-filled sky or a dark horn lantern through which the brightness of the soul could flicker just a little. In the eyes especially, as through windows, a glimpse of the soul could sometimes be seen. In his *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, Guillaume Deguileville described the effect:

For of the body trust me
The eyes no very eyen be
But like to glass I dare well say
Where through the clear soul is seen
And outward with his beams bright
Giveth thereto clearness and light . . .

The soul might also be snared by catching the sitter in some gesture, some semi-private moment in which he revealed himself. The artist might paint him turning, writing, removing a ring, fiddling with a button, so that the face was off-guard and open or, on the contrary, in communion with inward things. Many artists draped curtains behind their sitters, suggesting that they had been suddenly discovered in the private closets where they prayed in church. In the finished portrait Richard Plantagenet was probably meant to hold a white rose, the symbol of his house, which would thus appear to be the substance of his dreams.

Yet Plantagenet's soul remained mysterious. When all was said, the artist had not succeeded in drawing back the curtain. Those eyes, with their long girlish lashes, were fixed on something that was far away. They looked softly, without seeing. At some sudden noise (a shout in the corridor, the window-shutter slamming), you would expect this young man to be startled, even frightened, as his physiognomy suggested. Folk memory made much of this. He was Margaret of York's 'dear darling', a timorous creature who often ran away and who, in Thomas Gainsford's favourite phrase, was 'exanimated' time and again by the setbacks he encountered. Bacon, too, filled his story with metaphors that suggested both blazing and fading fire and, finally, lack of substance.

Time passed. He heard it by bells striking and calling to terce, prime or evensong. It was the year 1494 of human salvation; and he knew what feast it was, whether St Gregory or St John or the Finding of the Cross, more readily than he knew whether it was Monday or Thursday. Even the

shortest periods of time were measured by prayers: an *Ave Maria*, half a *Pater Noster*, the regular slipping of beads through the fingers. Yet pressure of time was constant and acute. Contemporary letters made it clear: ‘I had no leisure’, ‘with you right shortly’, ‘as soon as I may’, ‘written in haste’.

An hour, perhaps, had gone by now. Richard Plantagenet’s likeness in pencil or chalk had been faithfully committed to paper. The last quick strokes of the fur trim on his robe could be approximations. He had sat a long time at the beck and call of a workman. It was a relief to stand, move and re-establish his authority. A nod would bring the artist close to him, the lord’s nod of gentle condescension; and the artist, kneeling again to him, would show him what he had done.

The prince looked on the counterfeit. Or, you might also say, the counterfeit looked on the prince.

1

Into adventure

The beginnings of his story, as he told it, lay deep in the turmoil of the recent history of England. For three decades, to the astonishment of foreigners, the crown had been wrestled back and forth between the Houses of Lancaster and York. Henry V, the glory of Lancaster and the victor of Agincourt, had been followed in 1422 by a child-king, Henry VI, who grew into a saintly fool at the mercy of his scheming lords. England quickly descended into factional warfare, with extraordinary slaughter of the nobility on both sides. In 1460 Richard, Duke of York, claiming descent from Edward III, tried to proclaim himself king but was rebuffed and, in short order, killed. The next year, his son defeated Henry in battle and was crowned as Edward IV at Westminster.

The claims of Lancaster had been blurred by bastardy in the fourteenth century; but those of York, too, were not secure. Edward was king *de facto* but not *de jure.* In recent history, the Yorkist line had passed twice through women; and Henry, besides, still lived. In 1470 Edward IV's great rival, the Earl of Warwick, forced the king into exile in Flanders and brought the befuddled Henry out of prison. The restoration was short-lived. Edward was back within months, gathered supporters in the north, and early in 1471 recovered the crown. For some years afterwards, comforted by this epitome of glorious kingship, the country calmed down. But Edward died in 1483 at the age of forty, leaving in the balance the fate of both England and his two child-sons, Edward and Richard, whose story this young man gave as his own.

He had told it repeatedly, and could do so now if you required it of him, together with the sighs and tears that such a history called for. As a fatherless child of about nine,

he and his brother Edward, who was twelve, had been committed to the Tower of London on the orders of their uncle Richard, Duke of Gloucester. Edward was supposed to await his coronation; instead, he had been killed. He himself, however, though tipped for death, had been spared and bundled abroad. He had been forced into wandering ‘in various countries’ without a name or a background that anyone knew, or was allowed to know. In this way, he passed eight desolate years. Towards the end of them, apparently not yet free of aimlessness and poverty, he ‘spent some time in the kingdom of Portugal’.

Meanwhile, his uncle had been crowned as Richard III. His reign was short. In 1485 Henry Tudor, the Earl of Richmond and a sprig of the House of Lancaster, returned from exile in Brittany to encounter Richard at Bosworth. The king was cut down like a dog in the midst of the battle, and his rival was acclaimed as Henry VII in his place. To try to defuse the claims of York, and to dampen England’s affection for that house, Henry married Edward’s eldest daughter and united their lines. Yet Yorkist claims, true or false, continually dogged him. Every year, risings occurred in some part of England or another. As Henry suppressed them, gradually accustoming the country to his firm and careful rule, the most dangerous claimant of all, this young man, Richard Plantagenet, remained in hiding. He waited only his moment, and the backing of other princes, to cast down Henry Tudor and send him back into the obscurity from which he had come.

So his story stood in most of Europe in 1494. But in 1497, when Henry captured this young man, a different tale eclipsed it. It came in the form of an official confession, already known and publicised in part beforehand, to which he apparently now agreed and put his signature. According to this, he was no prince, but the son of a customs-collector, John Osbeck, who worked up and down the River Scheldt at Tournai, on the border of France and the Burgundian lands.

(His own name, though not given in the confession, was established at the same time as Piers Osbeck.) As a very small boy he had been put out to board with his aunt, then sent away to learn Flemish, only to be shuttled back home as war broke out between the local towns and Maximilian, then Archduke of Austria and regent of the Burgundian Netherlands. At the age of nine or ten he went to Antwerp with a merchant of Tournai called Berlo and, almost at once, fell sick. He remained ill for five months, lodged at a skinner's place beside the House of the English Merchant Adventurers. He was 'brought from thence', still convalescent, to the market at Bergen-op-Zoom, where he stayed two months at a tavern called 'The Sign of the Old Man'. After that he was hired by John Strewe, a merchant, possibly English, of Middelburg in Zeeland, and then by Sir Edward Brampton's wife, who took him as her page to Portugal. After a year there, restless again, Piers put himself into service with a Breton merchant who took him to Ireland. There, some Yorkist malcontents decided to press him into service as a false Duke of York.

Brampton himself, a Portuguese-born merchant, soldier and royal servant, gave a different version of this young man's life before he had resurfaced as a prince. He told it to Spanish investigators in Setubal, in Portugal, in 1496. Again the boy came from Tournai, the son of a boatman called Bernal Uberque. He had not, however, gone into trade, but had been placed with an organist in the city. There for some years he had learned *el oficio*, the profession of playing music, especially at the Mass, but eventually he had run away. His age then, according to another Setubal witness who said he had talked to his father, was 'fourteen going on fifteen': still a tender child, by current thinking. He was a *moço* to Brampton, the Portuguese for a servant boy, though once or twice he used the word *rapaz* for him, slang for a youth. Typically for the time, Brampton did not use his