

Reforming England's 'harde covetouse hert':

William Worcester and the diagnosis of defeat.¹

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By 1450 the English had been defeated in battle at Formigny and had lost their lands in northern France, with the exception of Calais. In 1453 the Hundred Years War was effectively over. Inevitably, contemporaries attempted to diagnose the factors that had led to defeat. William Worcester offered a diagnosis in the *Boke of Noblesse*. Although the purpose of the *Boke* was to encourage and promote a new campaign in France, Worcester also sought to explain and assess the English defeat and to offer models of reform for the future conduct of the war. He conventionally attributed defeat to the nation's 'synne and wrecchidnes' and, within this framework, he identified the particular faults of the nation which had led to divine disapproval. These faults were lack of prudence and governance 'and havyng no consideracion to the comon wele, but rathir to magnifie and enriche oure silfe by singuler covetise'.² He discussed the practical manifestations of lack of prudence with reference to the

¹ William Worcester, *The Boke of Noblesse*, ed. J. G. Nichols (London, 1860), p. 84.

² Worcester, *Boke*, p. 51.

truce of Tours of 1444 and the cession of Maine in 1448.¹ Worcester identified ‘singular covetise’ as responsible for the misconduct of captains who withheld wages from their men and thus caused them to mistreat the non-combatant.

On one level, Worcester sought to encourage a new campaign in France. He did this by emphasising issues of lineal and national pride and by presenting the French war as the forum for chivalrous and noble deeds. Allmand and Keen recognise that Worcester stressed the responsibility of each member of society to contribute and participate in the war.² Yet they do not explore the extent to which this responsibility was placed on to the heads of Edward IV and his council. Worcester, through the *Boke*, urged the nobles to redress the wrongs incurred by their predecessors because those decisions had resulted in the dispossession of English subjects. The manner in which Worcester handled this diagnosis, and the interests he seems to have represented, cast light upon the aim of this text and on the audience he was attempting to admonish and inspire. This, then, reveals another cause behind the defeat that Worcester did not specifically identify: that there had been a division of

¹ During the negotiations leading to the truce of Tours in 1444, the English made important concessions in saying that the claim to the French crown might be traded in return for sovereignty in Normandy; In December 1445, Henry VI secretly undertook the surrender of Maine, in so doing he appeared to renounce sovereignty over it. The implication of this was that the English might yield to further military or diplomatic pressure. In March 1448 the capital, Le Mans, finally surrendered. This meant that Henry VI had initiated the dispossession of English soldiers whose homes and livelihoods were in Maine; C. T. Allmand, *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c. 1300-1450* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 35.

² C.T. Allmand and M. H. Keen, ‘History and the Literature of War: The *Boke of Noblesse* of William Worcester’, in C. T. Allmand (ed.), *War, Government and Power in Late Medieval France* (Liverpool, 2000), p. 98.

interest between the English living in France and those in England. Keen identifies Worcester's discussion of lawyers as a reflection of this divide, but does not extend his argument to the text as a whole.¹ It seems, however, that division of interest was an integral element of Worcester's argument. To Worcester, the victim of this division was the man-at-arms: it affected his livelihood and his conduct towards the non-combatant.² In order to repair this division, Worcester appealed to duty and used Roman models to illustrate how easily this could be redressed.

Although the *Boke* was presented to Edward IV in 1475, it seems that Worcester was working from an earlier draft, written in the early 1450s in the period immediately following the loss of Henry VI's French territories.³ Worcester had first-hand experience of the problems the English were facing in France.⁴ He entered the service of Sir John Fastolf in 1438 and remained with him, as his secretary and surveyor, until Fastolf's death in 1459.⁵ He

¹ M. H. Keen, 'The End of the Hundred Years War: Lancastrian France and Lancastrian England', in M. Jones and M. Vale (eds.), *England and her Neighbours, 1066-1453: Essays in Honour of Pierre Chaplais* (London, 1989), p. 311.

² It is clear that the pursuit of peace had real consequences for the soldiers living in France. Allmand emphasises that because the soldiers lost their 'lyvelode' this meant that they lost everything. This was why compensation was so important; Allmand, *Lancastrian Normandy*, p. 77.

³ Allmand and Keen, 'History and the Literature', p. 94.

⁴ Fastolf and Stephen Scrope also provided Worcester with some of the military anecdotes in the *Boke*; J. Hughes, 'Stephen Scrope and the circle of Sir John Fastolf: moral and intellectual outlooks', in C. Harper-Bill and R. Harvey (eds.), *Medieval Knighthood IV: Papers from the fifth Strawberry Hill conference 1990* (Woodbridge, 1992), p. 133

⁵ Hughes, 'Stephen Scrope', p. 130.

spent part of that time living in France.¹ He was both a collector and a compiler of books and his cultural interests ranged widely. The writings of Cicero, in particular, had a great influence on Worcester and the circle surrounding Fastolf.² Worcester was clearly familiar with Christine de Pizan's *Faits d'Armes et de Chevalerie* as she provided the authority for sections of the *Boke*. He also used instructive examples drawn from Roman history. The *Boke*, then, is evidence of Worcester's appreciation of the past and of what its lessons could offer to the future.

Worcester differentiated in his text between the external factors and the internal, English problems responsible for defeat. Part of Worcester's diagnosis concerned the trickery of the French. He wrote of the 'unjust dissimilacions, under the umbre and coloure of trewis and abstinence of werre late hadde and sacred at the cite of Tairs',³ referring to the truce of Tours in 1444. He then specified the actions that affirmed the guilt of the French party: the imprisonment of Gilles of Brittany and of Simon Morhier, provost of Paris, amongst other actions. Worcester emphasised the treachery of the French by presenting a chronological account of the history of war between the Kings of France and England. He then summarised that:

¹ Allmand and Keen, 'History and the Literature', p. 93.

² Hughes, 'Stephen Scrope', p. 131.

³ Worcester, *Boke*, pp. 4-5.

none of alle these trewes hathe ben observed.. but [they] alway brake the saide trewes whan they coude take any avauntage ayenst us, as it shewethe openly, and may be a mirroure for ever to alle cristen princes to mystrust any trewes taking by youre saide adversarie or his allies and subjectis.¹

This summary also implicated the English. Worcester directly criticised the weakness of English counsel earlier in the text where he stated that Normandy was lost partly because of ‘overmoche trust and avauntage gyven to your adversaries’.² Yet this was a lesson that some of those involved in France had already learnt. Fastolf in his report of September 1435, composed in response to the Treaty of Arras, advised against trusting the French because ‘alle treaties ... were ever sone afterward brokin...whan they coud take or avise thaire avauntage over the kingis men.’³ Therefore, there was an implied criticism that had Henry VI and his councillors been prudent and listened to the advice of men experienced in the war (like Fastolf) they would not have put so much faith in the truce.⁴ This also confirmed

¹ Worcester, *Boke*, p.39.

² Worcester, *Boke*, p.30.

³ J. Stevenson (ed.), *Letters and papers illustrative of the English in France during the reign of Henry VI* (London, 1861-4), 2: 577.

⁴ Parliament did express its opposition to peace in 1446. There was also concern in Parliament about the cession of Maine; C.T. Allmand, *Lancastrian Normandy, 1415-1450: The History of a Medieval Occupation* (Oxford, 1983), p. 256.

Worcester's authority as 'historian'. The examples of French trickery which fill the *Boke* serve as that 'mirroure', as a warning for the future.

According to Worcester, then, weak counsel was partly responsible for the loss of the French lands. He developed his criticism of this throughout the *Boke* by using Roman models to provide parallels with the English experience. He wrote of 'yong counceillours [who] had wasted and brought to nought their inheritance callid patrimonie'.¹ Worcester suggested that wise counsel could have fundamentally altered the course of the French war. In order to do this, he used the example of the war between King Pirrus and the Romans. He stated that the Romans 'ayenst their worship' were about to make peace with King Pirrus 'to her uttermost dishonoure'.² The senators, however, followed the advice of Appius, the priest of Minerva, who advised them to start a new campaign against the king and not 'to become subject to their ancient adversarie'. The result of this advice was that 'the saide senators were revived in their courages thorough the wise exhortacions of Appius, and had the victorie of Pirrus'.³ The point is that the senators *act* upon the advice, unlike the Lancastrian government. This example has another function: it seems that Worcester was identifying his position as advisor with that of Appius. His intention, like that of Appius, was to encourage a new campaign. Therefore, the implication was that Edward IV would have victory over his

¹ Worcester, *Boke*, p. 64.

² Worcester, *Boke*, p. 60.

³ Worcester, *Boke*, pp. 60-1.

‘auncient adversarie’, as long as he followed Worcester’s advice. Roman models, then, offered prescriptive advice. In fact, Worcester encouraged their use: ‘so wolde the mightifulle God that every governoure wolde...folow the pathis and weies and examples of the noble senatours of Rome, how they were attending to the commyn profit, setting aside singular availe’.¹

Worcester’s diagnosis of defeat, then, also focused upon the problem of ‘singular availe’. The self-interest of captains, in particular, was a problem that had to be controlled. This is demonstrated by Fastolf’s instructions to Somerset in March 1448 in which he advised the appointment of captains that were ‘discrete and konnyng in the werre, noughte covetous...soche men as wolle not enriche hemsilffe’.² Worcester identified self-interest as a problem when he wrote of captains who ‘take more kepe to good than to worship and using justice’ and as a result did not pay their men.³ Throughout the text, the necessity of paying men ‘bethout any defaulting [or] abbrekking of here wagis’ was stressed.⁴ In fact, Worcester stated that this was the most important responsibility of a captain.⁵ Payment of wages discouraged greed on the part of the man-at-arms. This was important because greed could have a devastating effect upon war:

¹ Worcester, *Boke*, p. 58.

² Stevenson (ed.), *Letters and papers*, 2: 592.

³ Worcester, *Boke*, pp. 29-30.

⁴ Worcester, *Boke*, p. 31.

⁵ Worcester, *Boke*, p.30.

it is fulle gret jupardie and perille to an oost where as covetise of pillage and rappyne
 reignithe among men of armes more than their entencion is to kepe and meinteine the
 right of their princes partie¹

Ostensibly, non-payment of wages was a problem because it meant that the soldier could not protect the civilian population. It was because this was ‘uncorrectid ne punisshid’, that it was ‘one othir of gret causis that they (civilians) have turned their hertis frome us’.² When men were paid, however, they did ‘not have cause to oppresse and charge youre obeissauntes and youre peple in taking their vitaille bethout paieng therfor’.³ Thus Worcester highlighted division of interest at the most basic level. Although the treatment of the non-combatant had become more of an issue for contemporaries, Worcester’s discussion does not seem to have arisen from a sympathetic concern for their situation.⁴ The non-combatant was used as a

¹ Worcester, *Boke*, p. 31.

² Worcester, *Boke*, p. 72.

³ Worcester, *Boke*, p. 72.

⁴ In France, at least, Christine de Pizan, Eustache Deschamps and Alain Chartier expressed concern over the treatment of the non-combatant. Allmand argues that there was a growth of public awareness in the non-combatant’s experience in wartime, as evident in poetry, the analyses of social commentators and the books of advice to kings; C. T. Allmand, ‘War and the Non-Combatant in the Middle Ages’, in M. H. Keen (ed.), *Medieval Warfare: A History* (Oxford, 1999), p. 269.

rhetorical strategy to emphasise the self-interest of the captains who defraud their men.¹ In this respect, Fastolf's questions to Somerset drawn up in 1449 are useful:

Item there are due by this Somerset large sums of money from the wages of the soldiers, which he would not pay, so that it became necessary for them to plunder the people and to waste the country, and this to such an extent that there was no one who dared continue in the country who was not killed or plundered, and the poor country people were pillaged day and night, in such sort that some of them abandoned the country that they might go to the side of the French. As he would do no justice to the inhabitants, it followed that the whole country turned to the French.²

In this case, the civilian was used to incriminate Somerset and to emphasise his misconduct. Worcester discussed the results of non-payment upon the civilian population in order to ensure that men-at-arms were paid regularly.³ Lack of interest in the war, manifested by non-payment of soldiers, was an issue Worcester brought to the foreground of his debate. He illustrated its practical consequences by referring to the events of 1451 in which the army

¹ Worcester employed a similar strategy in his discussion of churchmen: Worcester, *Boke*, pp. 74-5.

² Stevenson (ed.), *Letters and papers*, 2: 721.

³ Worcester had first-hand experience of this problem, as Fastolf never forgot the unpaid wages that Bedford owed him; Hughes, 'Stephen Scrope', p. 136.

was about to embark to Guyenne but instead ‘taried upon the see coostis in Englande almost a quarter of a yere or their payment was redie. And the cite of Burdeux lost in the meantyme for lak of rescue’.¹ This was a genuine illustration of the relationship between insufficient finance and defeat. Ultimately, it was those who refused to finance the war who were responsible for the defeat.

The soldier was not criticised by Worcester for his dependence on payment. Worcester argued that you cannot expect men to fight without regular payment, nor remain loyal when they feel that they have been forgotten. Following Christine de Pizan, he stated that ‘no cheveteyn can have ne kepe long tyme good men of armes eville paied or long delaied’.² He argued elsewhere that adequate provision and wages ‘myght [have] couraged and enforced [the soldiers] to...kepe stille the possession’.³ Provision was important because it made men ‘the more abillere to contynew and resiste youre ennemies in caas of necessite’.⁴ Worcester, therefore, linked the private interests of the soldier with the wider interest of successfully conducting the war.⁵ According to Worcester, Fastolf ensured that the castles

¹ Worcester, *Boke*, p. 42.

² Worcester, *Boke*, pp. 30-1.

³ Worcester, *Boke*, p. 48.

⁴ For example, the instructions addressed to Somerset, March 1448; Stevenson (ed.), *Letters and papers*, 2: 593.

⁵ The importance of adequate provision was a continuous theme of Worcester’s papers. For example, the letter from the English council at Rouen to Henry VI in 1441, informing him of the state of affairs in France and Normandy, was concerned with lack of provision and the feeling

and towns in his care were well provisioned.¹ Worcester described how the duke of Exeter, faced by rebellion, went to a castle under Fastolf's care: 'And at hys commyng the chieff questyon he demaunded of the seyd Fastolf [was] how welle he was stored...he seyde for half yere and more suffisaunt. And hyt comforted gretly the prince'.² Without such careful provision and regular wages for the man-at-arms, courage would fail and territories would be lost. Worcester's diagnosis was also designed to encourage and promote a new campaign in France. He achieved this by emphasising that Edward IV had a moral responsibility to defend his claims and his rights in France. This is particularly evident in his discussion of the soldiers who had been dispossessed as a result of the loss of the English territories in France. Worcester emphasised that although the lands were lost in a previous reign, Edward IV and the nobles had a duty to repair the damage. He used the voice of the dispossessed to speak directly to the king and his sense of responsibility: 'we dolorous parsones suffring intollerabile persecucions and miserie, aswelle in honoure lost as in oure lyvelode there unrecompensid, as in oure meveable goodes bereved, what shalle we doo or say?'.³

of neglect this engendered. Stevenson (ed.), *Letters and papers*, 2: 603-7.

¹ Worcester, *Boke*, p. 68. This also contributes to Worcester's authority to advise in these matters because the actions he advocates were actually employed by 'myne autor'.

² Worcester, *Boke*, p. 69.

³ Worcester, *Boke*, p. 49. He was representing the feelings of the dispossessed as illustrated by the petition of Maine of 1452: In consequence of this deliverance you have abandoned a great number of people, your faithful subjects and placed them under the authority of your said adversaries. If you had been well and faithfully advised and warned in this matter, you would never have suffered it to be done. Stevenson (ed.), *Letters and papers*, 2: 600.

Worcester emphasised that they were ‘put owt of their londis and tenementis yoven to hem by youre predecessoures’.¹ This shift in responsibility was also achieved by Worcester’s insistence that it should not go unpunished. ‘Nay, nay, God defende that suche intrusions, grete wrongis, and tiranye shuld be left unpunished, and so gret a losse unpunished and not repared!’.² This insistence, however, suggests the extent to which the soldiers living in France had been forgotten and their interests had not been represented. Indeed Worcester, by using the voice of the dispossessed in his self-proclaimed authoritative text addressed to Edward IV, was implying that their voice was not being heard through other channels (as was clearly the case as they still had not received compensation). Allmand attributes the lack of recompense given to the dispossessed to ‘a calculated indifference to the fate of the king’s subjects in Normandy’.³ A division of interest is suggested by another exhortacion:

and yet seeing they bene christen men, and lyvyng under youre obeissaunce, lawes-
yoving, and yelding to youre lawes as trew Englysshe men done...why shulde it here
after be suffred that suche tormentrie and cruelte shulde be shewed unto theym?⁴

¹ Worcester, *Boke*, p. 41.

² Worcester, *Boke*, p.

³ Allmand, *Lancastrian Normandy*, p. 263.

⁴ Worcester, *Boke*, pp. 73-4.

Worcester was anxious to emphasise that these men were English subjects, living by the same laws as the English in England. By doing this, he attempted to bridge the gap between the two. Yet the problem he indirectly identified was that the experience and the situation of these men was markedly different from those living in England who had not lost as much, in material terms, from the loss of the English possessions.¹ Worcester's aim, then, was to promote the interests of the dispossessed and to bring those interests to the centre of the campaign.

The inadequate financial support for the English possessions in France was of central importance to Worcester's explanation of English defeat and to his hopes for a new campaign. It is not coincidental that Worcester concluded the *Boke* on precisely this theme. He used an example taken from Titus Livius concerning the Roman war against Africa which described how the commons in Rome had grown tired of taxation and the war. In order to enthruse the commons, the senators, estates and governors agreed to give the majority of their wealth 'for the defence of the contree of Cesille and keping of the lande and see frome ennemies'. The lesson Worcester drew from this was that the Romans' position in the war, through this 'largesse', was 'repared and brought ayen to worship, prosperite and welfare'.²

¹ The participation of soldiers in the violence after the loss of the lands is an indication of how much resentment they felt. Adam Moleyns was murdered by soldiers at Portsmouth, Suffolk was brutally murdered at sea; Lord Say, treasurer of England was murdered and his tomb was defaced by soldiers 'dryven' out of Normandy; at the beginning of August, Somerset arrived in London accompanied by soldiers was charged with the loss of Normandy; Allmand, *Lancastrian Normandy*, p. 264.

² Worcester, *Boke*, p. 84.

He used this lesson to conclude the *Boke* with an exhortation: ‘And wolde the mightifulle God that every *harde covetouse hert* were of suche largesse and distributif of here meveable good and tresoure to the comon wele, as for defending us frome oure adversaries’ (my italics).¹ As a piece of propaganda, which was formally addressed to Edward IV, another audience emerges from the shadows. It was the financial support of a particular group in society which fundamentally altered the course of the Roman war. The parallel to the English situation is clear: that those who had been reluctant to invest in the English possessions in France had a duty to do so.

The expulsion of the English, according to the *Boke*, stemmed from the decisions made by those hard, covetous hearts. Self-interest meant that wages were not paid, a policy of peace was pursued and that people were dispossessed without recompense. It also meant that Parliament did not grant enough money to finance the war and defend English possessions. As Keen emphasises, the general pattern of taxation between 1429-44 was of grants at a reduced rate and with collection spread over an extended period.² Even in 1449, Parliament made only a grant of £30,000 payable over the next two and a half years, much of it intended for Calais. Parliament was clearly more interested in the Calais staple than in the fate of Normandy.³ It was self-interest that was responsible for the men of gentle blood who

¹ Worcester, *Boke*, p. 84.

² Keen, ‘The End of the Hundred Years War’, p. 302; Allmand, *Lancastrian Normandy*, p. 255.

³ Allmand, *Lancastrian Normandy*, p. 257.

went into law and ‘civile matier’ instead of fighting for England. It is clear that they chose law ‘to enriche hem silfe or to be magnified the more’.¹ What is more important is that these men were ‘among alle astatis more set of’ than a soldier fighting in the king’s war.² The implicit suggestion is that their interests were likewise more valued. This was a problem because, as Keen emphasises, the French wars were not generating a massive income in England and became, therefore, relatively unimportant to men in England.³ Yet England’s financial support of the lands was essential because English ‘possession brought no advantage to France or to Frenchmen’.⁴

The *Boke* represented the consequences of this division in interest. The dispossessed and unpaid man-at-arms was both the symbol and the victim of divided interest in the *Boke*. Worcester placed the man-at-arms at the centre of a text which offered both a diagnosis of defeat and a model for reform and this promoted the role of the soldier. The man-at-arms was essential to the success of a campaign, both in terms of loyalty to the King and his cause, and in the experienced counsel he had to offer. Had the lowly man-at-arms and his opinion been considered, the English possessions would not have been lost. Worcester offered this advice

¹ Worcester, *Boke*, p. 78.

² Worcester, *Boke*, p. 77.

³ Keen, ‘The End of the Hundred Years War’, p. 306.

⁴ Allmand emphasises that the costs of war were too much for Normandy and *pays de conquête* to cope with alone; Allmand, *Lancastrian Normandy*, p. 202; Keen, ‘The End of the Hundred Years War’, p. 308.

as an author whose authority rested in his personal experience and relationship with the men involved in the war as well as in his extensive use of Roman, military examples. This meant that his advice transcended that of the self-interested petition on behalf of soldiers *and* that of the learned clerk who had no first-hand experience of the situation and practices he was advocating. By uniting practice with learning, Worcester provided a practical and attainable model for military reform.

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