

Three Views of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster

Sean Rocke
Dr. Green
British Studies (ID 382)

John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, was a rich, powerful, and influential nobleman in the 14th century. As the son, uncle, and father of kings, Gaunt was never far from central authority. For some time, late in Edward III's reign and in Richard II's youth, Gaunt was the *de facto* source of royal power. Gaunt's position as perhaps the most important nobleman in the late 14th century led to his public image being recorded and preserved in a variety of forms. By viewing John of Gaunt from the perspectives of his contemporary critic Thomas Walsingham, his eventual brother-in-law Geoffrey Chaucer, and later playwright William Shakespeare, a well-rounded view of Gaunt's influence on and reflection of the policies and attitudes of his time, and the generations that followed can be seen.

During his lifetime, Gaunt repeatedly came under intense and sometimes violent criticism from the public, reflecting growing social unrest and the politically volatile issues surrounding succession and kingship that would contribute to the Wars of the Roses after Gaunt's death. During Edward III's reign, Gaunt's political and military decisions caused considerable unease, especially near the end of Edward III's life (1377), when Gaunt was given control of domestic policy and forced to deal with a hostile and potentially disloyal parliament. Gaunt used his position to infringe upon the judicial liberties of the people in order to overcome criticism of the crown. At the same time, he generated a flat-rate tax (poll tax), which, combined with his other restrictive policies, led to riots against the duke.

The rioters were overwhelmingly the poor who were disproportionately charged by the tax.¹

It is at this time that contemporary chroniclers of political life turned on John of Gaunt. Thomas Walsingham, in particular, shows a great bitterness towards the duke, accusing him of acting “with unbridled malice and greed, fearing neither God nor man, and... subverting the liberties of the city of London²”. While Walsingham’s criticisms may have been bolstered by a personal vendetta against Gaunt, it was clear that his views reflected at least a fraction of the public opinion.

This opinion, both among “members of elite groups (magnates, courtiers, knights... in parliament, London citizens) or... wide sections of the commons³” only grew more negative in Gaunt’s time as an advisor to and the *de facto* power behind the ten-year-old king. Although he lacked a formal political position, Gaunt held pervasive, informal power as a counselor to the young Richard II. In addition to his informal sway, Gaunt was also independently powerful. He was the rightful lord and master of over one third of the lands of England, and employed a number of troops large enough to compose a small private army⁴. But even his lack of formal office and his powerful status as a nobleman did not stop the public outcry about many of his policy decisions.

¹ Simon Walker, ‘John, duke of Aquitaine and duke of Lancaster, styled king of Castile and León (1340–1399)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press: online edn. 2004).

² Antonia Gransden. *Historical Writing in England II: c. 1307 to the Early Sixteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1996), 138.

³ Anthony Goodman. “John of Gaunt: Paradigm of the Late Fourteenth Century Crisis”, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser. 37 (1987), 133.

⁴ John Julius Norwich, *Shakespeare’s Kings*. (London: Viking, 1999), 56.

The most striking example of this unpopularity also shows the social changes occurring during his lifetime. In 1381, the Peasants' Revolt marked a new involvement of the poor and laboring class in the affairs of the country, and an increase in their awareness of the actions of the aristocracy. This initial revolt, although accomplishing relatively little, marked the beginning of a struggle for a rise in the circumstances and involvement of the lower class.

However, the main target of the angry revolt was not the young king. "It became clear... that it was John of Gaunt whom the common people chiefly blamed, despite his lack of formal office, for the military failings and financial exactions of government⁵" which inspired the revolt. One of the most detailed accounts of the Peasants' Revolt comes from Walsingham's chronicle, in which he is again bitterly critical of Gaunt. Although Walsingham's opinions seem biased and particularly spiteful, "there is no reason to suppose that this part of his chronicle is not a fairly accurate reflection of the views of many of his contemporaries. The violent attacks on John of Gaunt in 1377, when the Londoners paraded his arms reversed, and during the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, when his palace of the Savoy was sacked, show that feeling against him ran high."⁶

None of Gaunt's efforts to make peace with the people seemed to erase their distrust of his motives. For example, even after peace had been made and the rebels dispersed, "in February 1382 the citizens of London pointedly requested that they should have only one king and be ruled by him alone."⁷ The people wanted to know

⁵ Walker, 6.

⁶ Gransden 139.

⁷ *Ibid.*

to whom they were loyal, and whose authority was supreme: the King, or his powerful and unloved uncle behind the throne. This request epitomizes the 14th century preoccupation with issues of succession and legitimacy. However, these issues were not only characteristic of the 14th century. These very issues would continue to influence politics and public opinion through the Wars of the Roses into the Tudor dynasty with its obsessions over legitimacy.

In spite of all this, there is proof that Gaunt was not the “ambitious, greedy, restless baron... in search of a crown⁸” that Walsingham and other chroniclers portrayed. He could have easily attacked Richard II’s claim to the throne, having the power, money, and military forces to do so, but he chose to remain loyal.⁹ Through his actions, “the duke had shown himself an unyielding defender of the prerogative: he had stood by the crown in the difficult earlier years”¹⁰ and it would have been a major character change for him to be the villain portrayed by Walsingham and whose arrest and execution the peasant rebels demanded in 1381.¹¹

The other side of Gaunt’s personality was recorded in literature by Geoffrey Chaucer, who was personally acquainted with the duke, and later a part of his family. In Chaucer’s eyes, Gaunt was no power-hungry villain waiting in the wings; indeed, “there were better sides to his nature. Chaucer praised him as ‘tretable/ Right wonder skilful and reasonable,’”¹² a genuine, courtly, chivalrous man who reflected the ideals of the Order of the Garter, another facet of the 14th century

⁸ Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. (London: Routledge, 1960), 368.

⁹ Norwich, 56.

¹⁰ Nigel Saul, *Richard II* (New Haven: Yale, 1999), 27.

¹¹ Walker, 6.

¹² Bullough, 368.

world that Gaunt reflects. Although Chaucer's writings could be seen as biased because of the nature of his relationship to the duke, several pieces of evidence point to a fairly realistic portrayal in his writings. It has been argued that Gaunt employed Chaucer, but *The Book of the Duchess* was almost certainly not a commissioned piece, but one written by Chaucer to commemorate the loss of a beloved lady.¹³ Also, at the time of these writings, Chaucer was not yet related to Gaunt, their tie not being official until Gaunt married Kathryn Swynford, the sister to Chaucer's wife Philippa Roelt, in 1396.¹⁴

Chaucer's writings show us much about the duke of Lancaster because "Gaunt's inner feelings are testified to by the expression of them by proxy... in Chaucer's first major poem, *The Book of the Duchess*",¹⁵ written for Gaunt after the death of his first wife, Blanche of Lancaster. The character of the Man in Black is identified as Gaunt by the use of the phrase "long castel"¹⁶ for Lancaster. This characterization provides a genuine portrait of love and grief at the loss of a wife, in the form of "a courtly poem. Courtly life and convention are everywhere taken as the norm."¹⁷ This view of Gaunt, then, reflects his role as a member of the Order of the Garter, a society created by Edward III in 1348 to commemorate military success and courage. The Order developed into a group that prized both martial

¹³ Derek Brewer, *The World of Chaucer* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 113

¹⁴ Douglas Gray, 'Chaucer, Geoffrey (c.1340–1400)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press: online edn. 2004).

¹⁵ Brewer, 112.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Book of the Duchess*, W.W. Skeat, ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1899), l. 1318.

¹⁷ Brewer, 114.

prowess and courtly courtesy.¹⁸ Gaunt's position as a knight of the Garter, elected in 1361, gave him a symbolic badge of membership in a society seen as having "a courtly, poetic, 'magical' image... of immense psychological power"¹⁹ that undoubtedly reflects an aspect of the important social values of chivalry, courtesy, and romance in the 14th century.

Gaunt's contemporaries show his negative influence on politics - perhaps unfairly - and his reflection of chivalric values, but it is through playwright William Shakespeare that we can see Gaunt's lasting impact. Gone are the ideas of a traitorous leader, and gone is the concept of Gaunt as a grand and courtly lover. Instead, generations later, Gaunt is described as a revered voice of wisdom, held up as a beacon of patriotism because of his place at the head of both Lancastrian and Tudor families. Gaunt's reappearance in literature two hundred years after his death is no accident. Shakespeare reinvented the image of John of Gaunt for a very specific reason in *Richard II*, a part of the second tetralogy of history plays. The second set of plays; *Richard II*, *Henry IV Part 1 and 2*, and *Henry V*, focus on the qualities of a good leader, among which Shakespeare, much like Walsingham and others before him, places "the ability to choose rightly between good and bad counsel."²⁰

These plays, like all of Shakespeare's histories, are also full of the Elizabethan and Tudor concern over the legitimacy of power.²¹ So, "Shakespeare's Gaunt—the grand old man of his time, full of years and wisdom, the father of his country... is the

¹⁸ Brewer, 100; David Green, *Edward the Black Prince: Power in Medieval Europe*. (Harlow: Longman, 2007) 100-2.

¹⁹ Brewer, 103.

²⁰ Bullough, 356.

²¹ Donald Friedman, "John of Gaunt and the Rhetoric of Frustration," *ELH*, 43: 3 (1976), 279.

playwright's own creation, the ideal—and dramatically necessary—counterpoint to the vapid, feckless King,"²² having changed over the years from a target of anger and scorn to the image of all that is honorable and right in a ruler. This transition is necessary, because the destruction of all that Gaunt represents, "the old, established, traditionalist, and thoroughly medieval order", justifies the decision of Henry Bolingbroke, Gaunt's son, to usurp the throne.²³

Although *Richard II* is by no means Shakespeare's most famous play, or even his most famous history play, the death-bed speech he allocates to John of Gaunt is particularly well-known. It clearly illustrates the changing impression of the duke of Lancaster in the period between the drastic social and political changes that occurred in England prior to his death in 1399 and Shakespeare's Tudor world at the dawning of the 17th century. John of Gaunt's "speech on the glories of England... [was] a set-piece of patriotic fervor as early as 1600,"²⁴ and although the imagery of England as "this earth of majesty, this seat of Mars/This other Eden"²⁵ is certainly full of patriotic zeal, that is not Shakespeare's only point within the speech. It is also clear that besides being the voice of patriotic pride, Gaunt's character is written to believe the value of England is "the special province of his own bloodline."²⁶ It is not likely that such a thought occurred to the real duke of Lancaster, as he died with Richard II still on the throne and with no theatrical foresight regarding his son's future as King Henry IV.

²² Norwich, 115.

²³ George Gopen, "Private Grief into Public Action: The Rhetoric of John of Gaunt in "Richard II", *Studies in Philology*, 84: 3 (1987), 340.

²⁴ Friedman, 279.

²⁵ William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, II.i.41-42.

²⁶ Friedman, 283.

Shakespeare's fascinating recreation of John of Gaunt as, perhaps, a historically inaccurate idol serves as proof of his influence stretching far beyond his lifetime. As the source of the Lancastrian and Tudor family lines, Gaunt was a literal father figure for the kingdom in later years, and Shakespeare's characterization of him as such shows that two hundred years later, his indirect influence was at least as strong as the influence he held as the counselor to the king. John of Gaunt led an unusual life, retaining almost unprecedented power and wealth, amassing a long list of titles, and vacillating between the positions of respected counselor and dangerous scapegoat for much of his political career. Some contemporary records give an image of a man greedy for a kingdom that he never attained, but this image is contradicted by Chaucer's insights, along with the evidence of Gaunt's consistent loyalty to the crown. In the end, it is difficult to ascertain the precise character of John of Gaunt, but it is certain that he reflected the political unease of his time, and the cultural emphasis on chivalry, while his image grew after his death into a vital piece of the Tudor myth.

Works Cited

- Brewer, Derek. *The World of Chaucer* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000).
- Bullough, Geoffrey. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1960).
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Book of the Duchess*, ed. W.W. Skeat (Oxford: OUP, 1899).
- Friedman, Donald. "John of Gaunt and the Rhetoric of Frustration," *ELH*, 43: 3 (1976).
- Goodman, Anthony. "John of Gaunt: Paradigm of the Late Fourteenth Century Crisis", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser. 37 (1987).
- Gopen, George. "Private Grief into Public Action: The Rhetoric of John of Gaunt in *Richard II*", *Studies in Philology*, 84: 3 (1987).
- Gransden, Antonia. *Historical Writing in England II: c. 1307 to the Early Sixteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1996).
- Gray, Douglas. 'Chaucer, Geoffrey (c.1340–1400)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press: online edn. 2004).
- Green, David. *Edward the Black Prince: Power in Medieval Europe* (Harlow: Longman, 2007), 100-2.
- Norwich, John Julius. *Shakespeare's Kings* (London: Viking, 1999.)
- Saul, Nigel. *Richard II* (New Haven: Yale, 1999).
- Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*, II.i.41-42
- Thompson, E. M., ed. *Chronicon Angliae 1328-1388*. London: Longman, Green.
- Walker, Simon. 'John, duke of Aquitaine and duke of Lancaster, styled king of Castile and León (1340–1399)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004.