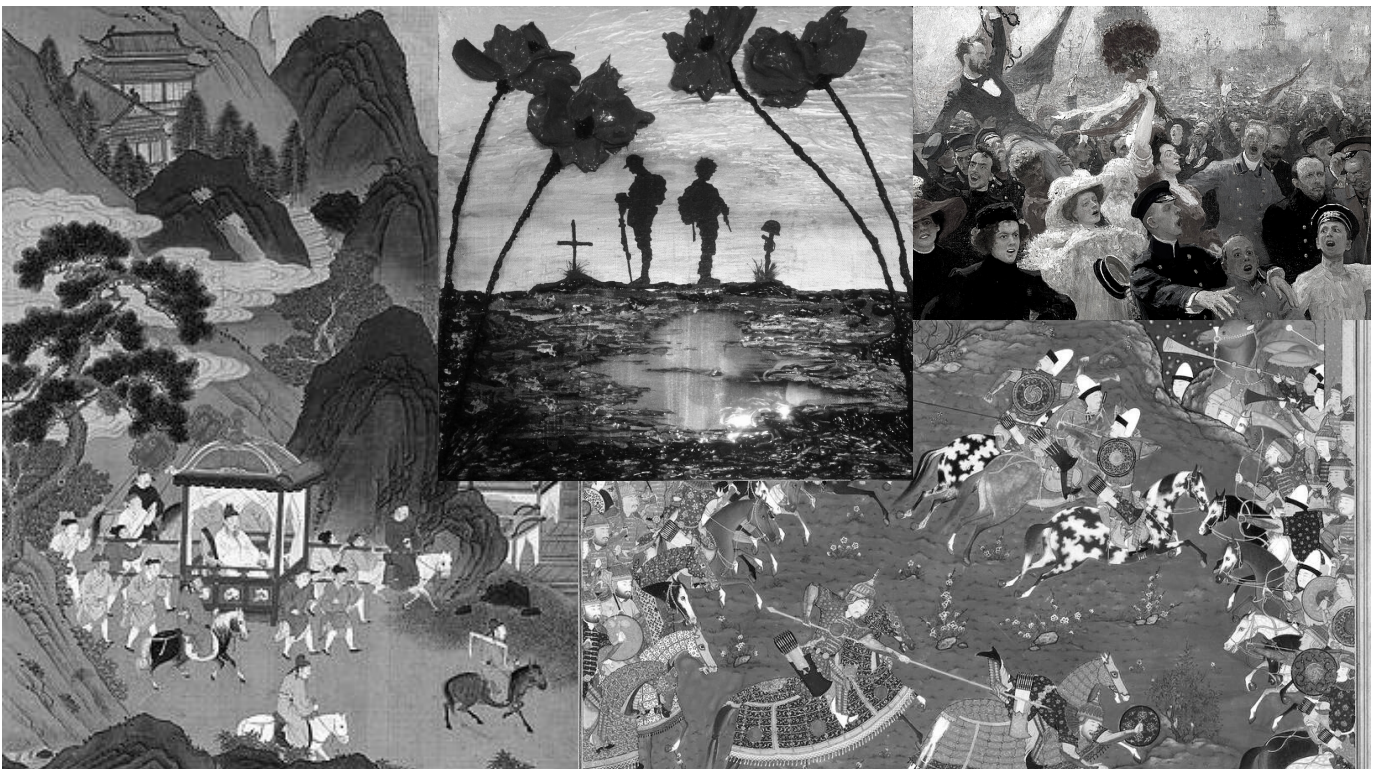


SUMMER 2022  
VOLUME 4

# LJR



## WESTMINSTER'S HISTORY REVIEW



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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear All,

Thank you for choosing to read the LJR! This year's edition contains a wide-ranging array of thought provoking articles, which explore areas of history rarely seen within the history curriculum, some of which even question the study of history itself. From Laetitia and Manon's investigations of art forms - literature and theatre - as vehicles of historical expression, to Amelia's discussion on medieval science, and Felicite and Nathaniel's incorporation of classical themes, I hope these articles will show you that our idea of history - what it includes and what it leaves out - is never fixed. The fact that history is constantly expanding and merging with other modes of enquiry is what makes history so exciting - never old, or rarified, but always relevant to the present.

I hope you enjoy reading the LJR, as much as I have enjoyed editing it. I certainly learnt a lot and I promise that you will too!

Best wishes,  
Claire

# Amelia Ross reviews

## The Light Ages

by Seb Falk

*Taking the 'Dark Ages' out of the shadows and placing them in the limelight*

Our very own William Camden, Usher of Westminster School from 1575 and Head Master from 1593, referred to the Middle Ages whilst introducing a selection of English literature in 1605. In this, he dismissed this period's relevance and significance as, "overcast with darke clouds, or rather thicke fogges of ignorance." This stems from the concept of the 'Dark Ages', an idea that has been in existence since the term was coined in the fourteenth century by Christian scholars such as Petrarch. Undoubtedly we have all heard this vague phrase being used, but what is it actually referring to, and why are these ages 'dark'? Was this age an utterly dull expanse of history in which there really was 'no light' politically, culturally, spiritually and intellectually? Have those in the past glossed over these 'Dark Ages' in history books because we know little about this period, or because what we do know is of little interest?

Originally the term 'Dark Ages' was used to describe the darkness of a period of cultural decline compared to the 'light' of classical antiquity and the new Renaissance revival of discovery. Over time, this phrase came to characterise the entire Middle Ages, spanning over a millennium; it became convenient for scholars to use to divide history into definite chunks, especially after the Reformation when this whole period could be mocked and disregarded in contrast to the present by Anglican antiquarians such as Camden, as chained to Catholic superstition. Though in recent centuries historians have cultivated a new appreciation for the brilliance of the medieval world, finding the original phrase inaccurate and negative, there certainly is still a stain on the reputation of this period, especially on that of its scientific achievements. However, as Sebastian Falk outlines in his book, we should not be misled by this intellectual prejudice: "the medieval reality, however, is a Light Age of scientific interest and inquiry."



Fig. 1 William Camden, Usher of Westminster School from 1575 and Head Master from 1593

Falk's recent book *The Light Ages* illuminates the medieval world as we have not seen it quite before. Within pages of careful explanations and exquisite diagrams, he presents to us the marvels of medieval science, testament to the intellectual flare of the wrongly denoted 'dark ages'. Falk uses the fourteenth century Benedictine monk John of Westwyk as his guide to take us through the realms of astronomy, mathematics, time keeping, navigation, architecture and even medicine. Educated in England's grandest abbey, St. Albans, John Westwyk came from humble beginnings and was not only a man of religion but was also an astrologer, inventor

and crusader. Throughout the book, Falk describes Westwyk's life and the intellectual pursuits he encountered, at the heart of various centres of scientific enquiry. This extends from his time at St. Albans where he would have studied Richard of Wallingford's elaborate clock, not only telling solar time but also showing the phases of the moon and tracking the tides at London Bridge, to his days at Oxford where he was thrown into a multicultural environment encompassing Jews, Muslims and other Europeans. Here he would have studied the great works of past scholars such as Aristotle, even investigating that the shape of the Earth was spherical in cartography, a century before Columbus. But Westwyk was not an anomaly, but merely one of many. Falk emphasises that during this period the growing support from Church and state authorities meant that new universities were developed and created all over Europe. These institutions had educated as many as a million students by 1500; this period was evidently far from one that saw a hiatus in scientific development.



Fig. 2. A reproduction of the Wallingford Clock

Scientists from this period clearly drew heavily from other classical and contemporary sources to help people to “understand their place in the universe”, and astrology and astronomy were at the heart of this; daily life was ruled by the rhythms of the stars. In other veins such as mathematics, Hindu-Arabic

were adopted, and numerical mnemonics were used to memorise the solar calendar, the order of religious saints and their feast days, and even the entire liturgy required for religious services. Interestingly, the friction between science and religion is a conflict that is still present in our society today, but what shines through in Falk's book is that this conversely promoted areas of scientific investigation. In a world where religion was of even greater importance, a unifier of all of those in society, this was no impediment to scientific progress; piety motivated investigation of the natural world, from work in small monasteries to the papacy, and for scholars attempting to read the mind of God through Creation, science was vital as the regular movements of the heavens proved His perfection.



Fig. 3. A Medieval Calendar

Perhaps most impressive are Falk's descriptions of the medieval instruments that Westwyk would have developed and used, allowing him to understand and make new discoveries. These include the astrolabe, a beautiful device that allowed one to determine when the sun would rise, measure the altitude of stars and even find constellations – a gateway to the secrets of the universe. Westwyk also mentions the albiton, adorned with numerous engraved scales and with the ability to predict anything from planetary speeds to eclipses. Even when he was dispatched to the isolated outpost of Tynemouth Priory in Northumberland, Westwyk continued his research, completing his crowning achievement, an Equatorie of the Planetis, in London. This was, as denoted by Falk, a “computer of the planets”, a tool used for learning astronomical concepts that

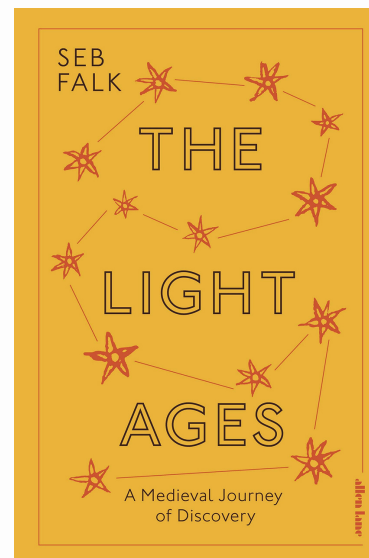
that was designed to calculate the position of the planets and track their movements.

The fact that these instruments are so hard to explain to someone who has never seen or used one, only makes Falk's explanations even more impressive. His claim that "this book will get you doing science" with Westwyk is certainly true, and even for someone who is not a STEM student, I found that Falk really does make light work of the dark ages. Now I feel I am proficient in multiplying Roman numerals, although I doubt that I would have had the ingenuity that Westwyk did to create a time-telling device using only a wooden disc, brass ring, pointer, and some pieces of thread. Reading about all of these medieval scientific discoveries is undoubtedly fascinating, but it is hard for us today to grasp just how revolutionary and impressive these developments were in the fourteenth century. To truly appreciate the marvels of these medieval scientific ideas, we must not compare our own modern structures to them, but assess how important they were in their time, and the impact they would have had on the society in which they were received.

To all of those who don't hold a candle for the dark ages, or who still associate the word 'medieval' with its barbaric connotations, even as used in Tarantino's 1994 film *Pulp Fiction* where Marcellus Wallace tells Zed that he will "get medieval on your ass", I implore you to read *The Light Ages*. This book will certainly change your perception of this period of history, showcasing it as a time of intellectual sophistication, but also acknowledging that this medieval 'science' was not akin to the 'science' we think of today, but still included the reality of some more comical errors and absurd ideas. After all, as Falk writes, "Scientific understanding has sometimes hit a dead end, or taken a step sideways, or backwards. And it still can". Though it is true that after this period a shift of scientific and intellectual discovery did commence in the late 15th century, I would argue that this was more of an acceleration of ideas that had progressed

during preceding centuries, perhaps brought on by the invention of the printing press, than a watershed. We must still appreciate and acknowledge the medieval period for not only its cultural developments but its lesser known scientific ones. At the very least, I would certainly challenge Camden's view that this period was full of 'ignorance', as I am sure all eager Westminster historians worth their salt, would as well.

About the book:



*The Light Ages: A Medieval Journey of Discovery* (2021)  
416 pp. Penguin £10.99



Fig. 4. Seb Falk, Lecturer in Medieval Science at the University of Cambridge

Laetitia Sanai discusses

## Historical inaccuracies of The Middle East in Richard F. Burton's *Arabian Nights*

The age whereby society's views on historic culture are carefully curated by the visitors and scholars of those countries is without a doubt entirely over. In an age where photos, videos and livestreams can be sent and recorded and consumed by billions each second, the need for historically informative novels is growing slimmer by the decade. However, a century ago there were very few people who could experience a foreign country's history or culture first-hand, and thus much of the population relied upon others' depictions and interpretations in order to shape their view on the world. Various historians and scholars pointed out the issues associated with the possible misrepresentation flawing novelists' accuracy of judgement, added to the disconcerting yet obvious fact that their main motivation was of course to sell novels to their target audience. In this way, it is evident how history has been manipulated and falsified in order to intensify an author's personal fixation with a particular culture, which can be most prominently seen in Richard F. Burton's translation of the *1001 Nights* tale, which he renamed to *Arabian Nights*.

Whilst translation of literature is supposed to create a 'common understanding' between cultures by retaining figments of linguistic and cultural features of the original in the translated version, ideological and personal involvement are largely prominent in Burton's translation. The original *1001 Nights* tale is a legend dating back to the 8th Century, originally sourced from Persian and Arabic background. It recounts the story of an independent and free-willed woman called Sheherazade, who persuades the previously

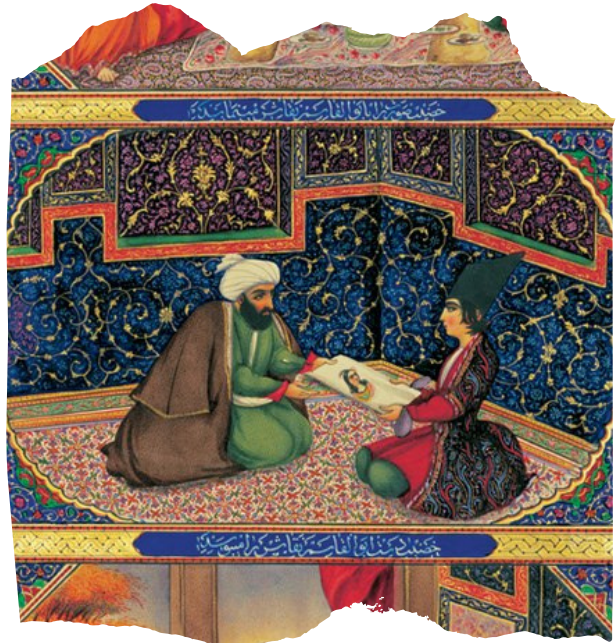


Fig. 1. *Scheherazade and the sultan* by the Iranian painter Sani ol molk (1849–1856)

betrayed King Shahryar to let her live for 1001 nights by telling him a new story each evening. The captivating nature of her storytelling allows her to break the King's cycle of the death penalty, and is ultimately a story of love, feminism and the power of imagination. Burton's 19th century written translation reworks the original text to reveal a deep sense of subjectivity, very much undermining its literary and historical legitimacy.

Throughout the 18th/19th centuries, the term 'orientalists' referred to academics specializing in the study of 'The Orient', a vast region spanning across three continents, composed of countries including; Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Israel and many more. Although many orientalists aimed to study legitimate areas of culture, history and

background to gauge an awareness of a particular country's nature, many of their motivations were influenced by the colonialist aim of 'controlling through knowledge', which not only perpetuated inaccurate and condescending narratives of the Middle East, but were instrumented from a position of European superiority over the 'inferior' races of the Middle East. The so-called Orient was often exoticized by writers including Burton as a result which strengthened Western assumptions of the primitive, socially backward and fundamentalistic nature of Middle Eastern culture, making literature at times a highly problematic medium with which the Western world could observe and subjectify 'The Orient.'

Burton's translation of the epic tale expands and overexaggerates sexual details in order to associate these traits with Oriental women, as well as integrating frequent motifs to acts of sexuality, particularly in the form of

adultery or illicit relationships. Not only does it contain the frequent hyper-sexualisation of women to emphasise Oriental women's superficiality and faithlessness, the prominence of its eroticisation has led many critics to hold that view that Burton's translation is borderline pornographic.

Literature as a medium of cultural education often does have positive effects on society, in terms of widening and acknowledging cultures which may not be able to be experienced first-hand. However, in a digitized world there are a multitude of sources of far better accuracy which can be used to gauge an awareness of a region's history. The recognition of the inaccuracies contained within Burton's adaptation of this classic tale is an important step in sharpening the line between cultural appreciation and appropriation, or in his case, mis-representational degradation.

Fig. 2. *Snake Charmer* by Jean-Léon Gérôme, c. 1879, a portrayal of the fictionalised 'Orient' in the Western imagination





## 'The Mirror and the Light' at the Gielgud Theatre

Adapted by Hilary Mantel and Ben Miles, directed by Jeremy Herrin

'The Mirror and the Light' is the explosive conclusion to Hilary Mantel's 'Wolf Hall' trilogy. It follows Thomas Cromwell as he comes ever closer to his execution, in a seemingly unstoppable unravelling of events. The book itself was published in March 2020 and won the Walter Scott Prize for historical fiction.

Mantel is rightly praised for her attention to detail and remarkably in depth understanding of Cromwell's life. She comments in an article she wrote for the Guardian in 2012 that, "biographies of him are cut up into topics (...) he does not seem to have a private life." It is clear that this is what sparked her curiosity. Her trilogy, which spans nearly 1,800 pages is the most complicated project she has ever undertaken and in order to make the reading experience as vivid and accurate as possible Mantel immersed herself completely in the period. Her apartment is described as a "secular shrine to Tudor England," filled with books on the intricacies of Tudor life, from fashion to food, according to one journalist. Mantel talks about the responsibility she feels to be consistent with history, saying, "I think you have to take your research seriously, otherwise there is no point at all." This is something she clearly went above and beyond in doing. She goes on to describe that where sources are lacking, in terms of the motivations and intentions of her characters, she does her best to understand the context they are placed in in the utmost detail, while also stepping back to see the bigger picture.



Fig. 1. *The Mirror and the Light* by Hilary Mantel

For Mantel, documents were not enough, as she also looked at pictures, listened to music and tried to understand the everyday facets of Cromwell's life.

Many comment that to Mantel, Cromwell is a living companion, and it is here that the only criticism of the trilogy lies. Ben Miles, who Mantel co-wrote the stage version of 'The Mirror and the Light' with and who has played Cromwell throughout the adaptation of the series, explained that, "she talks with him as if he's a living presence"

and “she seems to know him intimately but is always striving to understand him.” It is often noted that Mantel’s Cromwell departs from History’s, where he is cast as the villain. Throughout the *Wolf Hall* series, Cromwell is the centre of the Tudor Court, scheming, something she admits, saying, “In my interpretation, Cromwell is an arch-plotter, smarter than Henry though not meaner.” Many historians and critics argue that this gives him too much credit and does work to shift the wider historical perspective on Cromwell

Miles and Mantel were close collaborators on the stage adaptations of the books, but ‘*The Mirror and the Light*’ stands out as the one Mantel chose not to outsource to a playwright, but to co-write with Miles. Mantel has said that having completed the novels, she plans to leave historical fiction behind and write plays instead, ‘*The Mirror and the Light*’ seemingly acting as her bridge between the two mediums.

Given Mantel’s closeness to the production, it is, unsurprisingly, a careful portrayal of the events which lead to Cromwell’s demise. While intricately staged and crafted, the play is not dressed up in bells and whistles, with musical numbers and theatrical dramatics kept to a minimum, meaning sometimes its form is not fully taken advantage of. That being said, the drama is not lost, as Cromwell (Ben Miles) arranges the disastrous marriage between Henry VIII and Anne of Cleves, is betrayed, and ultimately beheaded. Miles’ portrayal of Cromwell is masterful, probably as a result of the time he has spent with Mantel during rehearsals for ‘*Wolf Hall*’ and ‘*Bring Up the Bodies*’ and writing ‘*The Mirror and the Light*.’ Miles asked so many questions about Cromwell in fact, that he helped mould the writing of the book, sparking different trains of thought for Mantel.

The set is simple yet dramatic, a monochrome which allows the vibrant colours of the costumes to stand out, particularly the red robes of Cardinal Wolsey,

Fig. 2. The set of *The Mirror and the Light* at the Gielgud theatre



who comes from the grave several times. While the events of the play are obviously tragic, there is still some space for humour, as seen in the early interactions between Cromwell and Henry. There are various tonal shifts throughout, and perhaps it is Mantel's portrayal of Cromwell as the man with all the answers which makes his downfall all the more painful.

It is also notable that the nuance of the time is not lost, even in the condensed format of the play. Although some moments have had to be cut, the book coming to eight hundred pages in total and the play running for about two hours and a half, the complex emotions swirling around Henry VIII's court are still apparent. However, those who are particularly dedicated to the period and/or the books will find this frustrating.

The success of the 'Wolf Hall' series has given Mantel an extraordinary platform, both in terms of her comments on the modern-day monarchy (recently causing scandal with comments regarding the Duchess of Cambridge) but also among historians. The scale and depth of her research has meant that she has transcended her role as "historical novelist," becoming a leading voice in the exploration and understanding of Cromwell, helping to shift the perception of him as a sleazy villain to a genius: in the



Fig. 3. Portrait of Cardinal Wolsey at Trinity College, Cambridge

wrong place, at the wrong time. However, Mantel writes in 2012, "It wasn't that I wanted to rehabilitate him. I do not run a Priory clinic for the dead." Even if this wasn't her intention, arguably, she succeeds anyway.

Mantel's impact in this field brings up a wider question: how far does historical fiction impact historiography, and because it is ultimately fiction, is this a good thing? Mantel says, "today any historical novel is also a historiographical novel," a marked shift from past historical fiction, and it appears she thinks it is important that the historical novelists of today understand this burden. In reality, very few historical novels have the same impact as Mantel's. Often much more filled with romance and rumour, it is easier for the reader to tell which gaps have been filled in. The danger lies, therefore, when an author with the dedication of Mantel fills in those gaps, casting the characters of the past in new lights in a way which is plausible and difficult to detect if the reader has not studied the period. These types of authors are beneficial to the study of history though: galvanising interest and (re)igniting historical debates which, one could argue, only brings us closer to a true understanding of a certain period.

# Women and Power, a manifesto

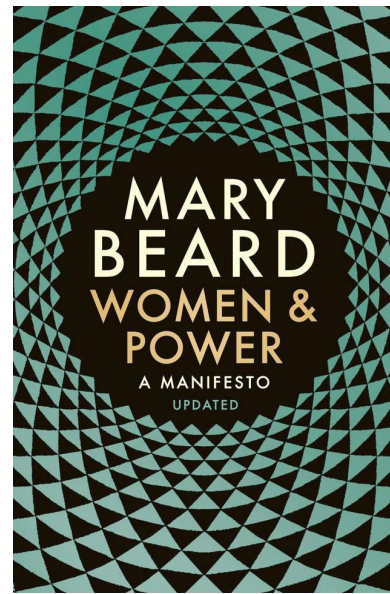
by Mary Beard

“Are you written by a woman, or are you written by a man?”

Many may have seen this question all over Tiktok. From movie stars, to celebrities, to users of the app themselves, the trend looks to reveal the characterisation of a person in considering the female and male gaze. Whilst being “written by a woman” describes a man who is respectful, kind, and unafraid of femininity, the phrase “written by a man” gained traction in detailing one-dimensional and overly sexualised women. Now, a clear trailblazer to the latest Tiktok trends, Mary Beard looks to broach this same topic – that is, the portrayal of women in power from ancient Greece to contemporary Britain, and the influence of the male gaze in politics - in her 2017 manifesto “Women and Power.” And, if you were wondering whether Medusa and Athena were “written by a woman or a man,” Mary Beard answers that it is undoubtedly, and most unfortunately, the latter.

A mere 115 pages, this book is nothing but concise and easy to the ear. And yet, small enough to fit into your pocket, it’s content is extraordinarily powerful – if somewhat oversimplified. What is the root of misogyny? Why are women continually excluded from modern structures of power? And how may we effectively combat this? Well, for Beard, “Britain’s best known classicist,” the answer (conveniently) comes from the domain she knows best: Greek and Roman antiquity. A realm, which even now, casts a shadow over the conception of power in the Western world. From our understanding of a good speech, to our associations of power with

About the book:



Women and Power: A manifesto (2017)  
144pp. Profile £6.99

prestige, the classical world has imparted both resilient and hugely impairing societal notions that encourage the silencing of women today. As such, Beard’s aim: communicate to “the millions of women who still share some of the same frustrations, just how deeply embedded in Western culture are the mechanisms that silence women, that refuse to take them seriously, and that sever them (sometimes quite literally) from the centres of power.” And, in this, by exposing the treatment of women from Philomela in *Metamorphoses*, to Penelope in *The Odyssey*, Beard is tremendously successful.

Poignant and timely, Beard’s manifesto is written in two parts. The first, an adaptation of a lecture given to the British Museum in 2014, looks to consider the public voice of

women. The second, a lecture given in 2017, considers the question of women in power. Beginning with Telemachus' put-down of his mother, Penelope, Beard launches her book "near the very beginning of the tradition of Western literature" at the start of Homer's *Odyssey*, almost 3000 years ago 'Mother,' he allegedly says, 'go back up into your quarters, and take up your own work [...] speech will be the business of men.' Right where written evidence for Western culture starts, women's voices are excluded from the public sphere. More than that, as Mary Beard explores, it seems that Homer portrays an integral part of growing up as a man in society - learning to take control of public utterance and silencing one's female counterparts. And this is not an isolated occurrence. More than that, classical women were recklessly revoked the right to human "speech." Afrania, a women "impudent" enough to initiate legal cases herself exhausted the crowd with her "barking" or "yapping." In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Io is turned by Jupiter into a cow, so she cannot talk but only moo, and Echo's voice is reduced to a mere instrument for repeating the words of others. Alternatively, women who are able to speak in the forum are presented as barely women at all. Known as androgynous, or "unnatural freaks" to the Romans, their voices could only be publicly heard, if, like Maesia (a first-century Roman anthologist) they "really had a man's nature behind the appearance of an



Fig.1 Penelope and Telemachus



Fig. 2. *Io, Transformed into a cow, is handed to Juno by Jupiter*, by David Teniers

omen." In fact, in trying to scourge for exceptions of this "muteness," Beard must suffice herself with two categories. That is, women who are enabled to speak out as victims or martyrs. And women who may legitimately rise up to speak with the purpose of defending their homes, children, or their own sectional interests - never to speak for men or the community as a whole. Exceptions that sound awfully familiar, even today. For a female MP to be Minister of Women (or of Education or Health) is a very different thing from being Chancellor of the Exchequer, a post which no woman in the United Kingdom has yet to fill.

However, importantly, Beard urges us not to see this silencing as a general reflection of women's disempowerment in the classical world (a continuation of limited voting rights and legal/economic independence.) Rather, such rejection from the public sphere of discourse is considered by Beard an "active" and "loaded" exclusion of women from public speech. Not only was the act of oratory skill one that ancient women *didn't do*, it was an activity which defined masculinity as a gender. Or, as Mary Beard quotes, the elite male citizen could be summed up by the Roman slogan *vir bonus dicendi peritus*, 'a good man, skilled in public speaking.' As such, unsurprisingly, ancient literature continually points to good oratory as synonymous with

the authority of the deep male voice; a direct contrast to a female's high pitched cowardice. And, in distant in time as it may be, the Western world is still a direct inheritor to this gendered speaking. We are the victims of a "powerful template for thinking about public speech, and for deciding what counts as good oratory or bad, persuasive or not, and whose speech is to be given space to be heard."



Fig.3. Mary Beard in her documentary "Meet the Romans" (2012)

Yet, what makes Mary Beard's work so fascinating, is her ability to relate these classical underpinnings to the way in which women's voices are not publicly heard in our contemporary society -from the boardroom to the political floor. Whether it be Elizabeth Warren's most recent silencing in the Senate, the abuse hurled at Jacqui Oatley as she became the first woman commentator on *Match of the Day*, or the continued media accusation of female "whining" in Parliament, Mary Beard does not fall short of describing how inherited bias has taught us to hear and react to the contributions of women in today's world. In fact, as Beard makes clear to us, she is uncomfortably familiar with such snubs herself. An active user of social media and Twitter, she has often been the victim of threats and insults - one's that seem to conveniently fit into the "old patterns" that her book so cleverly considers. In fact, Beard

believes that a significant subsection of the hate she receives is directed at the silencing of women. 'Shut up you bitch' being a fairly common refrain. It is a crude, aggressive way of getting women out of man's talk.

In fact, reading *Women and Power* in the wake of the 'Everyone's Invited' movement, Beard's exposures of female silencing seem particularly hard-hitting. As Rachel Cooke writes for the Guardian, "mute women; brutal men; shame as a mechanism of control; androgyny and avoidance as a strategy for survival. On every page, bells ring too loudly for comfort." Beard is undoubtedly drawing from very real and recognisable experiences, and it is this frankness which makes her book so insightful.



Fig. 4. Jacqui Oatley, the first female commentator on Match of the Day

And yet, not dwelling on the gloom of the present, Beard is keen to present actionable change for the future. How can women be heard? How can they be a part of the established power structure? Well, to answer this, Beard looks to trace the current underrepresentation of woman in power to the historical exclusion of women from public speaking. As a society, she argues we are unaccustomed to viewing women as authority figures, worthy of our respect in domains outside of the household. Yet, rather than exploiting the status quo, and appealing to the male gaze - by training our voices to be lower (as Margaret Thatcher did) or wearing

and appealing to the male gaze- by training our voices to be lower (as Margaret Thatcher did) or wearing suit trousers (as Angela Merkel currently does)- Beard's answer is radical. We need to go back to the "first principles" about the nature of spoken authority, and how we have learnt to hear authority where we do. Power itself must be redefined.

But, whilst Beard seems to deliver her brief of 'manifesto' in the declaration of her grand aims to eliminate misogyny, these are, on further examination, lofty and unactionable ideas. In fact, if anything, they are only the cause of further questioning. How are we to entirely redefine our deeply ingrained notions of power? What would this look like? Beard skims over some solutions, and proposes the "decoupling" of power from public prestige. She believes that rather than thinking of power as a possession, we should think of it as an attribute. For evidence of viability Beard offers up the Black Lives Matter movement (which was founded by

(three African-American women and is largely member-led.) Yet, the movement's decentralised leadership has often been prone to critique. It has led to confusion on its goals, lack of accountability, and great disorganisation in pivotal instances. Given such difficulties, it is unclear how such participatory leadership could function on a greater scale. Beard's solutions (or lack of) are not considered enough. In fact, I am uncertain that her book may even be considered a 'manifesto' - such little time is spent on solutions and no policy proposed is truly practical.

Notwithstanding the unsatisfactorily exploration of how to redefine the relationship of women to power, Beard nonetheless manages to illustrate why women require such urgent change to the systems of power that surround them. And, if one has any doubt of how deeply embedded the exclusion of women from power is in Western society, they have only to pick up this revelatory book.

Fig. 5 Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi, the founders of the *Black Lives Matter* movement



# Konstantinos Haidas

## Why is Counterfactual History a Valuable Field to Study?

We ponder counterfactual questions in our everyday lives as it is human nature to ask “What if?” questions. In almost every history lesson I can remember, someone has asked one of these questions to fully understand a topic, to quench their curiosity or to establish the most important factors that led to the world as we know it today. Recently, there has been a growing phenomenon of arguing that counterfactual history has an important role in the practice of history. The common belief in the twentieth century was that counterfactuals offered no insight in studying serious history as people believed that they were simply entertaining but that evaluating them has no place in academia. E. H. Carr claims that “the study of history is the study of causes” but I believe that counterfactuals have a valuable position in the subject in multiple ways.

Studying counterfactual history provides us with the opportunity to mitigate the bias of hindsight and understand historical contingency. We often find ourselves viewing events as inevitable when that is simply not the case. Some say that the fall of the USSR was inevitable in 1991 due to the internal domestic problems it faced, such as the economic struggles, failed political reforms and revolution throughout the satellite states. However, by questioning the course of events if an event like Chernobyl never occurred, which unveiled the flaws of the Soviet system - how concerned the government was with Russia’s image and not the safety of the people, the economic issues and the corruption of politicians - the USSR’s disbanding is definitely delayed. This would then also delay the Warsaw Pact and the Fall

of the Berlin Wall whilst also allowing the Soviets to project a better image of power and fear on the global community as Chernobyl revealed many internal weaknesses. The lack of fear played a crucial role in the USSR dismantling at a rapid pace in the 1980s and so, through an altercation of a single event the chain of events is entirely distorted.



Fig. 1. Fall of the Berlin Wall, November 9 1989

Counterfactuals offer the chance to challenge the contemporary historical mindset of assuming certainties. They can also be used as an analytical tool, a method of uncovering connections within historical events and discovering important, controlling factors. Through serving as thought experiments that test casual claims, we can properly assess causation in the historical narrative. For example, when studying medieval history, where source material is limited, it is very useful to use counterfactuals; through pondering questions such as “what if Cnut had not married Emma



of Normandy”, we can understand and investigate the underlying factors that led to the Norman Conquest and the beginning of Norman influence in England. We can further our understanding of the most important steppingstones that led to an apex. Judgment is interwoven in the study of history and so counterfactuals elevate history above basic record.



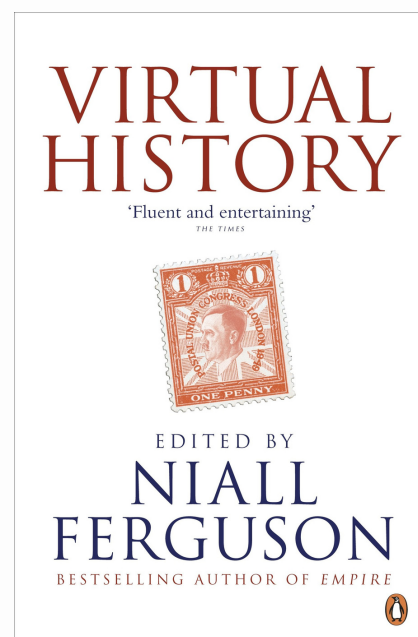
Fig. 2. The Bayeux Tapestry, depicting the Battle of Hastings

Counterfactuals also highlight disagreements among historians that would otherwise never surface. Discussions of these questions can bring underlying assumptions about the course of events to light, assumptions that we might not all share. These disagreements would have never emerged if historians simply investigated what happened in the past; it allows the community to clarify their beliefs and positions in these conversations as we then can begin the journey of considering why these differences in opinions occur.

For example, if we question the credibility of genius that is owed to Hitler through evaluating what would have happened if he faced more severe opposition or if it was his ruthlessness that made him seem powerful when in reality his policies were often vague and confusing, a debate is brought to light. Recently, historians suggest that history has bought into the myth of Hitler’s omnipotence as he was a strong dictator but also an inefficient politician. Counterfactuals help build this argument as every aspect of his power can be challenged or altered, resulting in a different outcome. We can assess the

multiple layers of Hitler’s authority and the origins of his influence. This experience is mind-expanding, stimulating the historical imagination and suggesting new hypotheses for potential further inspection.

Overall, this field of history can inform our value judgements by allowing historians to assess responsibility in historical events as we begin to understand causes and consequences. We can investigate the legitimacy of pride, of regret, of praise and of blame within history. Counterfactuals are an accessible and interesting area that plays into our very human nature to question the course of events. Some would argue that counterfactual history can exceed history, venturing into dystopian scenarios that provide no real advances in history but merely act as a game. However, these sci-fi situations can actually allow many others to become ingrained into the wider subject, leading to future involvement in more “academic” areas. They open up the subject to a wider audience as there will never be a correct answer - it is only a matter of opinion and thought-provoking debate.



Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals (2011).  
Niall Ferguson. 560 pp. Penguin. £12.99

# A Classical Antiquity Manifesto

In recent times, the choice of subject matter in the history curriculum has become controversial. Many deem it biased towards British history. Some also suspect that it glorifies Britain too much. It has also been called sexist and racist, issues which are, of course, significantly more important than those this article will discuss. Yet one gaping hole, particularly at Westminster, has been left unobserved. Where has classical history gone? Given that the history curriculum is under modification as I write, I do believe it is important to show that there is no justifiable excuse for classical history not being taught within it at Westminster.

From research and asking around, 3 reasons have notably come up in defense of this oversight. Firstly, there are too few historical sources to make teaching it worthwhile; secondly that it has had too little impact on the modern world; and, finally, that it is easier to teach within the classical rather than historical curriculum. I hope to prove all these theories wrong.

It is true that certain aspects of the classical world have challengingly few sources to help understand it, particularly in the archaic period from around the 8th century to the 6th century B.C.E. There are two reasons, however, that make this a futile argument against teaching it within the history curriculum. Firstly, ask any good history teacher whether a lack of evidence is an acceptable reason to ignore some period of history, and you will be laughed at. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, this would be blatantly hypocritical of the department, given that some periods of Medieval History

taught here, have significantly fewer historical sources than the vast hordes of writings and relics among other sources, that one can find for say in 1st century B.C. Rome.



Fig. 1. Numismatic evidence from 1st century BC Rome

A lack of evidence can never be a good excuse for cowering away from historical analysis. Perhaps, for example, evidence has been hidden, or the types of evidence remaining might suggest what was deemed important at the time. That is not even beginning to discuss the ways one can draw out so much from just a simple scrap of text. Only a single medieval history lesson is needed to learn how much you can infer from so little evidence.

Yet even if one does accept that argument, it cannot serve for many periods within classical history. In 5th century B.C.E. Athens alone one can find speeches of Pericles, the philosophy of Plato, by Sophocles, medical works by Hippocrates as well as the coins, sculptures and the other expressions of cultural identity that came, in many ways, to define the period. I am yet to find anything even close to that for periods such as 9th century A.D. England.

Others, however, try a very different argument: that it is not sufficiently connected to the modern world and hence its analysis is a waste of time. One could counter this argument in a single word: *Renaissance*. That the commonly accepted re-birth of Western culture revolved around people trying to imitate classical civilization may seem rather trivial, but there are other ways in which the modern world has been influenced: democracy, medicine, philosophy, literature and even engineering are concepts that originated or were made important by the classical world. It is only in the last century or two in fact, that people have thought differently. For many decades, classics was the only subject taught in schools for this very reason; that it was thought to encompass all these different strands of human culture. Some might argue, I guess, that even if every subject in the school curriculum did originate in the classical world, (which I would argue that except perhaps computer science, it did) that maybe where things began didn't matter. You would of course also be questioning the study of history itself.

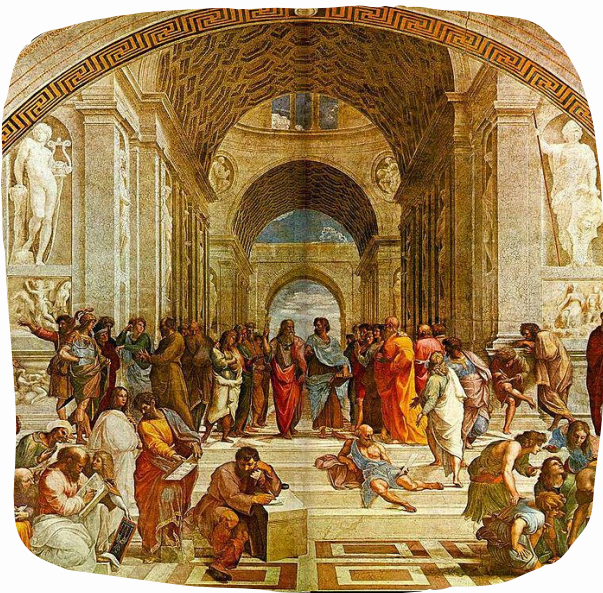


Fig. 2. *The School of Athens* by Raphael, c. 1511, highlighting the influence of classical thought on the Renaissance world

The third argument is perhaps the one that most teachers might argue: that while classical

history should be taught, it is easier to teach within classics than as part of history. That the classical curriculum at Westminster only includes history as a minor form of context must sadly be brushed aside for this article\*. While in some ways this is true - some classical literature being easier to analyse with historical background - one could make this argument for virtually any period of history at all. Could French history not be taught in French lessons? Or German history in German lessons? Even English history in English lessons? Now of course, one does often encounter historical context in these subjects. In English for example, the historical background for when *Hamlet* was written has been vitally important to understanding it. Yet the idea of reserving all French History for French or all Spanish History for Spanish rightly seems like madness. How therefore, can it be right to leave all classical history to Latin and Greek lessons?

In the Westminster School History Department Handbook, it says the most rewarding thing about teaching history is that it opens 'pupils' minds to the range and depth of human experience'. Surely studying the dawn of Western civilisation could be useful in doing that.

\* Having said that, one does sometimes encounter history in the seminars at A level.



Claire Zhao

## Food, setting and the Lancastrian monarchy

*A study on the coronation banquets of Catherine of Valois and Henry VI of England*

The Coronations of Catherine of Valois (23 February 1421) and her son Henry VI (6 November 1429, 16 December 1431) took place within eleven years, yet the differences in their banquet seating plans and menus, and in particular the 'soteltes' - elaborate sugar sculptures that accompanied each course - revealed different agendas, weaknesses and royal responsibilities.

The marriage between Catherine and Henry V, having been discussed in Anglo-French diplomacy for eleven years, was integral to the Treaty of Troyes, signed on 21 May 1420, which agreed upon the succession of Henry V and his heirs after Charles VI's death and the disinheritance of the dauphin Charles. However, Catherine's coronation on 23 February 1421 was a celebration of Catherine in her own right as an English queen consort; Henry himself was absent 'in order not to detract from Catherine's glory on that day.' Whilst the seating plan betrayed the political sensitivities of the continuation of the Hundred Years' War and the fighting against the dauphin, the menu - easier to manipulate due to its adaptable nature - acted as a proponent of medieval English queenship.

Henry VI's coronation banquets, on the other hand, seems to assert an imperial dominance over England and France - more effectively through his menu than through his seating plan. In the context of his rival Charles VII's coronation as King of France on 17 July in Reims that year, the extravagance of the feast after his English coronation and the richness of its imagery appears to be a rather desperate attempt for the seven-year-old

Henry to claim legitimacy over the French throne. Lydgate was commissioned to write verses to accompany the 'soteltes', heightening the sense of performance and propaganda in the coronation banquet. His French coronation banquet, which took place in Paris rather than Reims, whilst glossed over by English chroniclers such as the writer of the *Brut*, was heavily criticised by French sources for its disorganisation. Therefore, the coronation banquet of Henry VI seems to point to a more specific political agenda, whilst Catherine's banquet seems to represent wider medieval attitudes towards queenship.



Fig. 1. The exterior and interior of the Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Reims, where the coronation of the dauphin Charles took place

## Seating Plan

Guests at these coronation banquets were seated strictly according to rank, with the honoured guests placed at the high table. The closer a guest was sat to the king or queen, the greater the honour. Roles such as ‘Coppberrer,’ holding a sceptre and, in Henry VI’s case, the ‘kyngys champyon’ were recognised as great honours, signifying loyalty and royal favour. Whilst the chronicler of *The Brut*’s claim Catherine’s banquet was ‘opyn to alle pepull’ was probably exaggerated, there is a sense that coronation banquets were public spectacles, and therefore, that the setting of the banquet was important for the monarchy’s image, as well as for his magnates.



Fig 2. Drawing of Catherine from the *Beauchamp Pageant*, c. 1483-1494

Some of Catherine of Valois’s coronation banquet seating seems to adhere to protocol, such the Archbishop of Canterbury sitting on the right side of the Queen, served after her at every course, and close royal relatives, such as the ‘Countess of Hunttyngton’ (Elizabeth of Lancaster, Henry IV’s older sister) and the ‘Duke of Gloucestre’ (Humphrey of Lancaster, Henry V’s brother) honoured at the high table.<sup>8</sup> However, a closer examination reveals strains on the monarchy caused by the ongoing fighting against the supporters of the dauphin Charles and the internal instability of the

House of Lancaster. The absence of Thomas of Lancaster, Duke of Clarence (Henry V’s warrior brother), who had been given supreme command in early 1421 so that the King and Catherine could return to England to rally support and attend her coronation, indicated the severity of the ongoing war.<sup>9</sup> His absence must have been apparent to the guests and the public attending; therefore, the coronation banquet as performance and propaganda, without its regular players, displayed fissures behind the facade of extravagance.

In addition, the presence of the ‘Lord Wylloghby’ as ‘botelere’ and the ‘Lord Audeley’ as ‘aumerer’, ‘in the stede of’ the Earls of Arundel and Cambridge respectively, exhibits signs of internal instability. The Earl of Arundel, John (V) Fitzalan, was probably absent due to contesting claims to the earldom. The previous two earls’ premature deaths (through conviction to treason against Richard II and dysentery contracted in the siege of Harfleur) meant that there were no direct male successors to the Arundel.<sup>11A</sup> A more extreme example of succession disputes and factionalism under the Lancastrian Kings can be seen in the absence of the ‘Erle of Caumbryge’. The previous earl, Richard ‘of Conisbrough’, the grandson of Richard II but still the ‘poorest of the earls’, had been executed in 1415 for his instigation of the Southampton plot against Henry V, leaving a son who was only nine years old at the time of Catherine’s coronation. Therefore, the succession disputes that factionalism and warfare have caused led to a coronation with diminished personnel.

Information about the seating plan in the English coronation banquet of Henry VI is sparser, yet presumably it still possessed the same public, performative element as Catherine’s. Some aspects of the banquet were conventional, such as the presence of the King’s Champion, Sir Phillip Dymock, who proclaimed that ‘the kyng was ryghtefulle ayre to the crowne of Ingelonde’ and that he

was 'redy for to defende hyt as hys knyghte and hys champyon'. However, a chronicler also reports that at the head table, the king sat with Cardinal Beaufort of Winchester on his right and Archbishop Kemp as Chancellor with 'a byschoppe of Fraunce' on his left, with 'noo moo at that tabylle.' The lack of secular officials at the head table is interesting, particularly since the banquet, taken place at Westminster Hall after the coronation in the Abbey, is thought to represent the secular aspect of the coronation. Perhaps this was a deliberate decision by those who planned the coronation (and normally would have been honoured with a seat at the high table) to elevate Henry VI's divine right over the English and French thrones. The presence of the bishop of France also asserted the dual Anglo-French monarchy to the English people, yet the vagueness of this description implies either that this bishop was one of a lower status than a bishop who would normally preside over a French coronation, or that the identity of the bishop was unknown to the English chronicler of *The Brut* who recorded this event. Both implications point to Anglo-French disunity rather than the unity being portrayed.

The weakness of Lancastrian power in the French coronation banquet in 1431 was even more apparent than the English one. Whilst the Westminster based *Brut* chronicle dispassionately states that the banquet was 'open... to all men þat wold com, bothe pore and riche', the chronicler named the 'Bourgeois of Paris' described the banquet as a chaotic affair, with alderman and provost of the merchants unable to find seats apart from the 'ravenous common herd who had waited since early morning to guzzle and to steal'. The strict hierarchy of magnates that is so characteristic of coronation banquets seems to have broken down on this occasion, reflecting the lack of control in Lancastrian France and the lack of support from the Parisians.

### **International Royal Presence**

The setting of Catherine's coronation

banquet was particularly interesting as the King of Scotland, James I, was seated on the left side of the Queen, and was served after the Queen and two bishops (Canterbury and Winchester) at every course. Henry V's alliance with James I in the war against the French was particularly valuable as it countered the historic Auld alliance that sent 15,000 Scottish troops to France between 1419 and 1424. His presence amongst the English armies meant that Henry V could justify the accusations of treason against the Scottish forces which fought on the side of the French.<sup>18</sup> However, given that he had been captured by English pirates in 1406 and had been absent from Scotland for fifteen years, his 'real' control over the Auld alliance was significantly limited. The value of his loyalty in war was therefore more of a cultural one than a military one. Whilst the Auld Alliance continued throughout the rest of the Hundred Years War, James I's attendance and honoured seat in Catherine's coronation banquet would have presented an image of stronger Anglo-Scottish relations and a more powerful Lancastrian monarchy. In the wake of the Peasant's Revolt in 1381 and the discontent caused by the war with France in the years preceding Henry V's reign, the image of strong relations with Scotland would have been significant to the English people watching the banquet, as well as to the French and various kingdoms involved in the war abroad.



Fig 3. Westminster Hall, where coronation banquets have taken place

## Food

The food served at the coronation banquets were hugely symbolic, with both incorporated heraldic imagery and the food itself conveying ideas of kingship and queenship. Both banquets served three courses of food, with Catherine's comprising of around forty-five dishes and Henry VI's English coronation banquet including around forty.

Dishes in Catherine's banquet consisted mainly of fish and shellfish, including 'troute', 'grete crabys' and 'lampryns'. Whilst some attribute this to the fact that Catherine's coronation occurred during Lent, seafood was also seen as a feminine food at that time, meaning that the dishes served could be seen as a way to illustrate ideas of queenship. Indeed, the coronation banquet of Elizabeth of York on 25 November 1497 also consisted mainly of seafood and poultry, compared to Henry IV's which contained a lot of red meat.

The design of the food itself was also rich with royal imagery. The first course included a 'lech lumbarde' (a sweet, jellied dish) displaying the 'impaled arms of Henry and Katherine, together with the Lancastrian collar of esses badge popularized by Henry IV, and the Valois golden broom-pod badge of Charles VI'. The presentation of the Houses of Lancaster and Valois being intertwined, both in terms of Henry and Catherine's current marriage and its inclusion of precedence (in displaying the badges of Henry IV and Charles IV), conveys a sense of dynastic security that refers to the Treaty of Troyes and its agreement that the son of Henry and Catherine will be heir to both the English and French throne. Whilst this ignores the uncertainty surrounding the dauphin's claim to the French throne, it is interesting how Catherine's banquet seems to be more transparent in its portrayal of the agreement being between the royal houses, compared to Henry VI's banquet which appeals to precedence in mythology, with its dual imagery of St George and St Denis (3rd-century saints) and St Edward and St

Louis (semi-mythical kings of England and France).

Henry VI's English coronation banquet also included 'flampayne [pork pie] powdered with lepardis and flour de lices of golde'.<sup>24</sup> This 'conspicuous comingling of English leopards and French lilies' further asserts Henry VI's bi-national heritage and his claim to both thrones. Additionally, images such as 'a redde lech with lions corven theryn of white', 'a leparde of dole sittyng theryn' and 'artelop of redde corven theryn, a crowne about his neck with a cheyne of golde' are equally heraldic, displaying both extravagance and dynastic superiority.

The food served at Henry VI's French coronation banquet in 1431, however, was less well received. Whilst the banquet is recorded in less detail, it seems like the messages of the dual monarchy had a weaker effect. Whilst the chronicler of the Brut records that the meal contained 'all delicacye of metes and drynkes pat myght be ordeyned', the comment from 'Bougeois of Paris', that the food had been cooked three days prior to the feast, implies a lack of English control and experience in French lands. Whilst this source only records one chronicler's opinion, there seems to be a sense of dissatisfaction with the English monarchy in Paris. This is reflected in England's weakening hold of France in the ongoing war. Whilst the execution of Joan of Arc on 30 May 1431 was significant in raising English spirits, the ongoing disputes between Bedford and Beaufort, as well as the influence of Charles VII's coronation which marked him as the legitimate king 2 years earlier, marked a significant reversal of English fortunes that can be seen in Henry VI's French coronation banquet.

Food and feasting are aspects of history rarely studied, inaccessible due to the intangible nature of their subject matter. Yet an investigation of the surviving evidence - chronicles and poetry - illuminates hidden Lancastrian agendas and iconography.

## **Appendix: John Lydgate's Soteltes at the Coronation Banquet of Henry VI**

*[This was the first cours at his coronacion, that is to say, first, furmentie, with venyson. Viande Royal plantid with losenges of golde. Borehedes in castelles of earmed with golde. Beef. Moton. Signet (swan). Capon stued Heron. Grete pike. A redde lech with lions corven theryn of white. Custade Rooial (a pastry) with a leparde of golde sittynge theryn. Fritour like a sonne with a flour de lice therynne. A sotelté, Seint Edward and Seint Lowes armed in cote armours (coats of arms) bryngyng yn bitwene hem the Kyng in his cote armour with this scripture suyng]*

Loo here two kynges righte perfit and right good,  
Holy Seint Edwarde and Seint Lowes:  
And see the braunch borne of here blessid blode;  
Live, among Cristen, moost sovereigne of price,  
Enheretour of the floure de lice!  
God graunte he may thurgh help of Crist Jhesu  
This sixt Henry to reigne and be as wise  
And hem resemble in knyghthod and vertue.

*[Here foloweth the second course: that is to wite: Viande blank, barrid of golde. Gely partid (particolored jelly) writen and notid Te Deum Laudamus. Pigge endored (roasted and glazed). Crane. Bitore (Bittern). Conyes. Chikyngs endored. Partrich. Pecok enhakyll. Greate breame. Leches white with an antelop of redde corven theryn, a crowne about his neck with a cheyne of golde. Flampayne poudred with lepardis and floure de lices of golde. Fritour (fritter), a lepardis hedde with ii ostrich fethers. A sotelté, th'emperour and the kyng that ded is, armed, and here mantelles of the garters; and the kyng that nowe is, knelyng bifore hem with this reason:]*

Ageinst miscreauntes th'emperour Sigismound  
Hath shewid his might which is imperial;  
Sithen Henry the Fifth so noble a knight was founde  
For Cristes cause in actis martial;  
Cherishyng the Chirch, Lollardes had a falle,  
To give exaample to kynges that succede  
And to his braunche in especiall  
While he dothe regne to love God and drede.

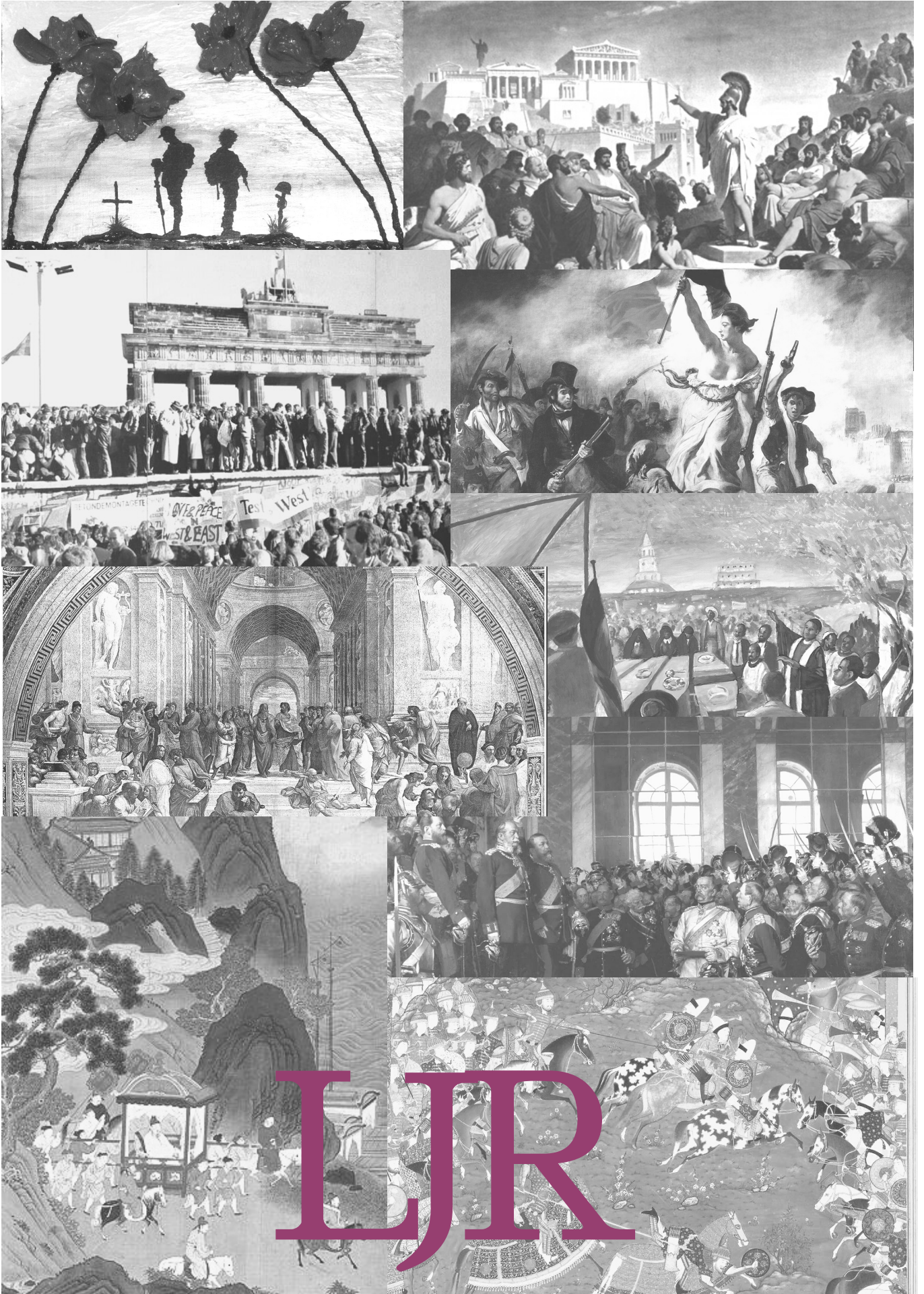
*[The thrid course sueth (follows); that is to say: Blaunde Surrey<sup>9</sup> poudrid with quatrefoilis gilt. Venyson rostid. Egrettes. Curlewe. Cokkes. Plover. Quailis. Snytes (Snipes). Grete birdes. Larkes. Carpe. Crabbe. Lech of three colours. A colde bakemete (a cold meat pie) like a shelde quarterly redde and white, set with losenges and gilt, and floures of borage. Fritour crispes. A soltelté of Our Lady sittynge and hir Childe in hir lappe, and she holdyng in hir hand a crowne and Seint George knelyng on that oo (one) side and Seint Denyse on that other side, presentyng the Kyng, knelyng, to Our Lady, with this reason folowyng:]*

O blessid Lady, Cristes moder dere,  
And thou Seint George, that callid art hir knight;  
Holy Seint Denyse, O martir moost entier,  
The sixt Henry here present in your sight,  
Shewith of grace on hym your heavenly light,  
His tendre yougth with vertue doth avaunce,  
Bore by discent and by title of right  
Justly to reigne in England and in Fraunce.



'The past changes  
a little every time  
we retell it'  
*Hilary Mantel*





Editor: Claire Zhao

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