

Shakespeare's Scarlet Hypocrite

by Anna Withers, a Winchester Cathedral Guide

Many characters in Shakespeare's history plays figure in the story of Winchester Cathedral, but surely the most significant of these is Cardinal Henry Beaufort. To what extent does Shakespeare's Beaufort represent the real man?



The effigy on Cardinal Beaufort's tomb in Winchester Cathedral (Photo: Julie Adams)

He appears in *Henry VI* parts 1 and 2. Part 1, presented in 1591-2, which was an enormous hit: *Harey the vj*, according to the Elizabethan dramatist Thomas Nashe, drew "ten thousand spectators (at severall times)". Nashe perhaps had reason to take note: many critics consider him to have been Shakespeare's collaborator on this play and there is much debate over which author wrote what. This is difficult to judge: if there are disparities or deficiencies in expression, are these attributable to an inexperienced dramatist yet to achieve his mature style, or to his less-gifted co-author? However, Beaufort also appears in Part 2, accepted as by Shakespeare alone, so clearly the dramatist had investment in the character.

We should not expect historical accuracy from Shakespeare: he was not concerned with anachronisms (his Cleopatra wears corsets) and shaped his knowledge to the purposes of his drama. His sources for *Henry VI* were Edward Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York* (1548) and Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (2nd ed 1587). Hall drew on Yorkist sources, and dismisses the bishop as "the riche Cardinall of Winchester, and nether called learned Bishop nor virtuous priest". (In the play the bishop is tainted by his association with the notorious Southwark brothels and the general lawlessness of the area). Hall damns Beaufort comprehensively – "haut in stomacke... hygh in

countenance ...riche above measure... to fewe liberal... dysdaynful to his kynne and dredful to his lovers, preferryng money before frendshippe". He presents Henry V's brother, the Duke of Gloucester, Protector of England and the bishop's rival for power, as "good" and trusty, drawing on the real Gloucester's own self-publicity passed down by Hall's sources.

The play opens with a struggle for power in the wake of Henry V's unexpected death, and a crisis in France where rebellion against English rule has broken out. Gloucester and Beaufort indulge in a vigorous and prolonged exchange of insults. Foreshadowing Shakespeare's Richard III, Beaufort confides his ambition and villainous intentions to the audience: "I will not be Jack out of office. The King from Eltham I intend to steal...". Gloucester, locked out of the Tower by Beaufort and labelled "proditor" (traitor), hits back with accusations of sexual depravity and calls Beaufort "scarlet hypocrite": a physical scuffle breaks out between the two and the Mayor comments "This Cardinal's more haughty than the devil". Gloucester later denounces Beaufort as a "presumptuous priest" and charges him with "vile outrageous crimes... audacious wickedness... lewd, pestiferous and dissentious pranks". This "most pernicious usurer, enemy to peace" has "laid a trap" to take Gloucester's life, out of the "envious malice of his swelling heart". (Shakespeare always excels at insults). Beaufort hypocritically defends himself ("I seek not to advance ... myself") and claims poverty and a keen desire for peace. Lords align themselves on each side: Henry VI attempts ineffectual mediation and riot breaks out. Gloucester increasingly appears in a favourable light: he offers genuine reconciliation but distrusts – rightly – Beaufort's response: "Love ... and hand for hand I give.... I intend it not". Elevated to Cardinal, Beaufort admits that he has bought his way to the position, and will use his authority to bring Gloucester down - "I'll either make thee stoop... Or sack this country with a mutiny".

In Henry VI Part 2 Beaufort and Gloucester initially appear as unlikely allies – "mine uncle Beaufort and myself ... debating ... how France ... might be kept in awe" but all too soon "ancient bickerings" resurface. Beaufort attempts to turn the lords against Gloucester: "He is mine enemy ... an enemy unto you all And no great friend, I fear me, to the King". Supporters rally to Gloucester, "a noble gentleman", and he and Beaufort (who "swears like a ruffian") challenge each other to physical combat. When Gloucester's wife is condemned for witchcraft and he loses his position as Protector of England, he recognises how Beaufort's "red sparkling eyes blab his heart's malice": he is handed over to the custody of the Bishop, who thinks him innocent but makes no attempt to defend him, declaring "That he should die is worthy policy But yet we lack a colour for his death". He will not allow Gloucester to make confession and, feigning excessive loyalty, offers "to provide his executioner". When Gloucester is in fact murdered Suffolk and Beaufort are blamed but at this point the Bishop is taken desperately ill, and (again like Shakespeare's Richard III) sees the ghost of his victim. He tries to bribe Death ("I'll give thee England's treasure") and deliriously raves of the "strong poison" he administered to Gloucester. Henry VI, present at the deathbed, recognises his great-uncle's evil life and begs him to repent, but Beaufort "dies, and makes no sign". Warwick passes the final verdict upon him: "So bad a death argues a monstrous life".

So much for Shakespeare's Beaufort, an unredeemed villain from start to finish. What of the real man? The real Beaufort certainly had enemies: it would have been hard for a man possessed of such huge political power, wealth and intimate royal connections (perhaps resented by some, as he was born illegitimate) to avoid them. One opponent was Archbishop

Arundel, whose niece Beaufort is said to have seduced in the only known sexual transgression of his life, fathering an illegitimate daughter. He has been accused of having an obsessive sense of his own dignity, touchiness over his birth and being over-zealous, and perhaps unscrupulous, in the amassing of wealth. He narrowly missed becoming Pope, and being twice offered a Cardinalate, which he accepted on the second occasion, aroused suspicions that he was putting his own interests, or the concerns of the papacy, before those of England. His relationships with his royal relatives were not invariably harmonious. He supported Prince Henry (later Henry V) in the latter's bid to become regent as Henry IV declined into ill-health: he showed pride and resentment in quarrels with his nephews, the Dukes of Bedford and Gloucester. He lost political influence over Henry VI as the King's religiosity and horror of war developed. He could be ruthless to enemies and had the ashes of Joan of Arc thrown into the Seine.

Nonetheless, his contemporaries saw him as a wise, morally upright and experienced man. He showed courage and resource in a crisis, once rallying fleeing troops on a battlefield. He was a valued mediator of disputes, showing patience, intelligence and good humour, and was trusted as an executor of wills. There is evidence that his servants were loyal and affectionate. He was unfailingly faithful to Lancastrian and English interests and strove to preserve these even in decline and defeat. Chancellor to all three kings, he repeatedly lent them huge sums of money, often accepting extremely lengthy repayment terms. There is no proof that his wealth was illicitly acquired, and if he showed concern for its fate after his death that would be seen today as responsible foresight. He retained the kings' trust despite occasional differences of opinion, and was godfather and guardian to the infant Henry VI. He tried to control the political loose cannon that was Gloucester by promoting conciliar government, and coming to realise that war with France was unsustainable sought – vainly - to promote peace. Evidence suggests that his role in the death of Joan of Arc was less prominent than has been thought, and he did say, on her initial recantation of her “voices”, that she must be admitted to penance, rather than executed. He set up the Order of Noble Poverty at St Cross, though events overtook his financial planning for it, and it had later to be reduced in scope.



Some of the ornamentation added to Cardinal Beaufort's chantry chapel (Photos: Julie Adams)
 (a) from the vaulting above the effigy (b) the cardinal's hat (c) Cardinal Beaufort's Coat of Arms

He prepared carefully for his death, both spiritually and financially. His will provided for prayers for his soul, legacies to religious houses and alms to the poor. He gave money to help poor tenants, to set free prisoners, and to provide dowries for impoverished girls. He took care of his servants and left legacies to his relatives, including his daughter and her husband. Henry VI refused his bequest on the grounds that “my uncle was very dear to me and did me much kindness while he lived”.

So he was very far from the “scarlet hypocrite” whom Shakespeare has given us. Surely a fairer epitaph is recorded by the hostile Edward Hall, who had to admit that Henry Beaufort was “a great stay to the king and the realm”.

Sources

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Anna Withers would also like to acknowledge the work done on Cardinal Beaufort by fellow Cathedral Guides, Julian English and Alastair Graham

A Note about Cardinal Beaufort's Coat of Arms (from editor Julie Adams)

Henry Beaufort was born in 1375, at the Chateau of Beaufort in Anjou. He was the second illegitimate son of John of Gaunt and his mistress, Katherine Swynford, who later became his wife. After his parents were married in 1396, Henry, his two brothers and his sister were declared legitimate by Pope Boniface IX. All of these siblings were however barred from succeeding to the throne.

The coat of arms used by Beaufort and his elder brother John, the 1st Earl of Somerset, are described as quarterly, 1st & 4th: Azure, three fleurs de lis or (France); 2nd & 3rd: Gules, three lions passant guardant in pale or (England); all within a bordure compony argent and azure.

A “bordure compony” is used to surround the arms of someone who was born illegitimate but was later declared legitimate. The descendants of John Beaufort, the Dukes of Beaufort, still use these arms, and many examples can be found at their family home, Badminton, in Gloucestershire, where the famous horse trials take place each year in late April or early May.