

Thomas Stanley; Traitor or Trimmer? The varying portrayals of the Stanley family through history

Kate Bicknell
University of Southampton

The Stanley family, in particular Thomas Stanley, have been the subject of much controversy. Were they traitorous regicides or kingmakers to the Tudor dynasty? This article explores the sources surrounding the Stanley family throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Many different accounts of the Stanley's actions exist in both popular imagery and contemporary sources. The image of the Stanleys is inextricably linked to that of Richard III. If Stanley is presented as the villain of the story of the Wars of the Roses, then Richard III is the hero, and vice versa. Naturally the opinion of the Stanleys usually depends upon which side of the fence one is sitting. While the Stanleys have become legend for their 'fence-sitting' talent, it could be said historians are not so inclined. In fact the historians of the Wars of the Roses could be divided into much the same camps as those who originally fought.

The Stanleys were based in Lancashire and Cheshire as a relatively unknown lesser noble family in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They reached their prime during the majority of Lord Thomas Stanley, first earl of Derby. As the eldest son of Thomas Stanley, first Lord Stanley had been strategically placed at the royal court since childhood, being recorded as a squire in the court of Henry VI in 1454.¹ Thanks to the smooth manoeuvring of his father, he was well placed to reach new political heights when he inherited his father's title in 1459. He succeeded to the title of 'King of Man', as well as this, he became the second Lord Stanley. Alongside his brother, Sir William Stanley, he was a powerhouse in the north-west of England. The Stanleys, including William, controlled vast swathes and even had control in large parts of North Wales. It was the Stanleys' actions at the Battle of Bosworth which brought them to the attention of many historians. Having refused to back either Henry Tudor or Richard III before the Battle, they were then recorded as having joined Tudor at the last minute to kill Richard III during his famous charge.²

Sources surrounding the Wars of the Roses show various opinions of the Stanleys in history. We can use both contemporary sources, alongside antiquarian and modern sources, to show how this diaspora of views has evolved over time. The historiography which follows the period may even give us a hint as to why opinions of the Stanleys are so varied. Some suggest they were the family who 'saved the day' at Bosworth, while others would accuse the family of treachery for the very same actions.

¹ Kate Barnes, "What Light Can Be Shed by Contemporary Sources in Relation to Lord Thomas Stanley's Personal Military and Political Strategy?," *School of History, Welsh History and Archaeology* (Bangor University, 2012). 4.

² Michael Bennett, *The Battle of Bosworth* (Stroud: The History Press, 2008). 99.

The Stanley ballad sources

Contemporary sources to the battle of Bosworth and the early reign of Henry VII often look favourably upon the Stanley family for their part in the accession of the Tudors to the Throne of England. This, in nature, also legitimises the reign of Henry Tudor himself in some cases, given that Richard III is painted as the villain of many contemporary poems.

Many of the near contemporary sources, such as 'The Rose of England', here contained within the Bishop Percy's Folio Ballads and Romances, place the Stanleys firmly in the hero's camp with verses, such as:

Then came in an egle gleaming gay,
Of all faire birds well worth the best;
He took the branche of the rose away,
And bore itt to Latham to his nest.³

There is no doubt that this refers to the Stanley family, given that their heraldic image is the eagle and child, not to mention Lathom being their family seat since this branch came into being. In fact, a large amount of this poem, Child ballad 166, is dedicated to the telling of the contact Henry Tudor had with 'the eagle', Lord Stanley, before Bosworth. However, the ballad also speaks of Stanley's army and their own victory at Bosworth Field:

Then the egle followed fast vpon his pray,
With sore dints he did them smyte;
The talbott he bitt wonderous sore,
Soe well the vnicorne did him quite.
And then came in the harts head;
A worthy sight itt was to see⁴

This ballad itself, collected as part of the edition by Francis James Child, is potentially contemporary with the battle; however, the earliest surviving manuscript copy is from the mid-seventeenth century.⁵ Without dating evidence, it is difficult to surmise the intent behind portraying Lord Stanley in this way, though, it is possible that, as patrons of other poems, the above poem is another commissioned by the family to make the Stanleys look good in the wake of such a victory. Whether the reference to the eagle here, following 'fast upon his pray', is directed at Lord Stanley alone or towards his entire force would make the difference between showing his prowess and bravery on the battlefield and proving him to be a capable military leader, who did not necessarily fight himself. Certainly, this poem is very favourable toward the Stanleys and it is by no means the only pro-Stanley poetical source.

³ J.W Hales and F.J Furnivall, eds., *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript Ballads and Romances*, vol. 3 (London: Spotiswood & Co., 1868), 190.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 187.

Another such source is 'The Ballad of Lady Bessy', which also lauds the contribution of the Stanleys at Bosworth Field. The edition used here is contained within the same collection as Bosworth Field, *Bishop Percy's Folio Ballads and Romances*. This poem also posits a motive for Thomas Stanley's lack of love for Richard III. Interestingly, this motive is quite unlike the common one, which is his son's captivity at the hands of Richard before Bosworth. It suggests that he was helping at the behest of the poem's namesake, Lady Bessy: she requested him to help, lest she be married to Richard III who in this text is a dastardly villain. Again this poem was likely to have been commissioned by the family, or someone close to them, as its message is one of showing the Stanleys to be heroic and vital to the events that occurred.

Subsequently to this, 'Bosworth Fielde'⁶ portrays the battle of Bosworth and the surrounding events, including the captivity of George, Lord Strange. It is another poem possibly written by the same author as 'Lady Bessy', which follows a similar vein in its treatment of the Stanleys within the text. The 'eagle', Lord Stanley, is also a key figure to the plot of this poem. This has suggested to some historians that they were written for the family, or possibly by a retainer of the family. One name that reoccurs is that of Humphrey Brereton, a member of Stanley's household. There is evidence within the poem that he wrote it, including a slip from third to first person when Brereton is mentioned. This, of course, is not irrefutable, but it does sway in favour of Brereton being the author. While both 'Bosworth Fielde' and 'Lady Bessy' portray the Stanleys as the heroes of the story, it is not necessarily the case until much later that they become demonised for their part in the death of Richard III. The bias here is clearly pro-Stanley, given that either these poems were commissioned by the Stanleys themselves, or in the possible case of 'Bosworth Fielde', were written by members of the household, who would have a vested interest in making their patrons look exceptional.

All of the above poems are examples of the favourable outlook towards the Stanley family which prevailed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The poems show Lord Stanley as a vital element of the story of Bosworth, despite the doubts that Lord Stanley himself took the field. Interestingly, few of the ballads suggest that he acquitted himself well on the battlefield, with the exception of 'The Rose of England', in which 'the eagle follows fast upon his prey'. This could be a reference to Lord Stanley himself or to his forces, which were certainly involved in the battle, however the eagle analogy ensures that it remains unclear. Battlefield prowess is a common way of lauding the hero of a tale, perhaps giving credence to the suggestion that he remained aloof from the battle, sending in his forces under the command of his brother.

Contemporary sources

Other contemporary sources, however, show either apathy or antipathy for the Stanleys. *The Paston Letters*, written throughout the period 1426-1485, rarely mention Lord Stanley. Direct mention of him in this passage does, however, refer to his caution with regards to obvious allegiance:

⁶ Ibid. ,233.

‘And than (when) the Duke of Clarence and the Earl of Warwick heard that the king was coming to themward, incontinent (immediately) they departed, and went to Manchester in Lancashire, hoping to have had help and succour from the Lord Stanley; but in conclusion there they had little favour, as it was informed the king; and so men say they went westward...’⁷

Written on Tuesday 27 March 1470, this letter to John Paston suggested the Stanley is forces refused to join Warwick and Clarence in their rebellion against the king, just as well as they fled the country after realising that they could not enlist enough nobles to their cause. They could not be sure of the king’s clemency and so escaped the country, though Warwick continued to cause trouble for years to come.⁸ This apparent steadfastness to the cause of the King was almost certainly down to Stanley’s certainty that the rebellion would fail, advancing his reputation for being shrewd.

Exhibiting some of the antipathy towards the Stanleys, which is less usual in surviving sources, is the interesting account of the Stanleys that occurs in the will of William Catesby. He was a Yorkist supporter and speaker to the House of Commons in Richard III’s only Parliament.⁹ Catesby’s will was written three days after the battle of Bosworth and shortly before his public execution in Leicester:

‘My lords Stanley, Strange and all of that blood help and pray for my soul for you have not for my body as I trusted in you.’¹⁰

This is a clear statement of an individual’s opinion, mere days after the battle had been won. It is obvious that to the Yorkists, this was a betrayal, and that Catesby at very least held the Stanleys responsible in part for the events that unfolded. Having a contemporary opinion such as this one, it is unsurprising Stanleys have a reputation for being politically changeable. Rouse suggests that Catesby’s disappointment at Stanley’s behaviour is also on a personal level. Catesby had been in a position to keep Thomas’ son and heir alive at the hands of Richard III, and expected the same in return from Lord Stanley.¹¹ Typically, Lord Thomas did not take up the case on behalf of Catesby, and he was executed shortly after the battle.

Later sources

Later sources also contribute somewhat polar views of the actions of Lord Thomas Stanley. For the purposes of this article the brief surrounding later sources is necessarily broad, as that it includes both William Shakespeare and a number of more modern historians and authors. In general these sources are less than favourable to the cause of family popularity, showing the Stanley family to be cold, calculating and often betraying allies to boost their assets. Charles Ross, somewhat scathingly, said of Lord Stanley, ‘His

⁷ John Fenn and Alexander Ramsey, eds., *The Paston Letters*, 2 vols. (London: C. Knight & Company, 1840), 43.

⁸ Michael Hicks, *The Wars of the Roses* (London: Yale University Press, 2010), 198-99.

⁹ Rosemary Horrox, "Catesby, William (B. In or before 1446, D. 1485)," *Oxford University Press*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4884?docPos=3>. [Accessed: 30/04/2015].

¹⁰ Sean Cunningham, *Richard III a Royal Enigma* (London: The National Archives, 2003), 76.

¹¹ A. L. Rowse, *Bosworth Field & the Wars of the Roses* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1998), 221.

family motto – Sans Changer – could scarcely have been more inappropriate, for the Stanleys owed no loyalty save to themselves.’¹² Although Ross also refers to the general lack of loyalty in the noblemen of Richard III’s court, he is particularly antagonistic towards Thomas. This hostile tack was often taken by apologists of Richard III, as Hicks suggests ‘those who regarded him as more sinned against than sinning’.¹³ Pro-Ricardian historians are a feature of the twentieth century academic community and have made somewhat of resurgence since the reburial of Richard III.

In the modern world, one of the most prolific writers of fiction based around the Wars of the Roses is Philippa Gregory. Her Cousins War series has been adapted into the television in the BBC drama *The White Queen*. Gregory’s novel concentrating on Margaret Beaufort naturally mentions her husband, Thomas Stanley. In *The Red Queen*, almost the first we hear of Stanley (bearing in mind the book is written as the protagonist, Margaret Beaufort) is ‘I think I have the very man who would turn his coat to the winning colours and I whisper his name to myself: Thomas, Lord Stanley.’¹⁴

In Gregory’s novel, and not with an absence of evidence in favour of this opinion, Stanley is shown to be guileful and shrewd. He is likened to a fox and frequent mention of his changing sides is made. While it is true that Stanley did not take the field at many of the battles of the Wars of the Roses, being a turncoat is not necessarily his main characteristic. In fact his ability to remain in favour with all sides of the conflict was remarkable. His own motives during the Wars of the Roses took precedent and many of his rivals ended up with their lands in Stanley’s hands. Gregory, while not necessarily in favour of the Stanleys’ actions at Bosworth, has portrayed Stanley in an interesting manner, putting emphasis on his ability to play the political game skilfully. Sean Cunningham, suggests that Stanley was ‘the finest example of how late fifteenth century noblemen could survive and prosper by avoiding enthusiastic participation in events.’¹⁵ This is probably one of the best, most tactful descriptions of Lord Stanley’s non-attendance. By no means does Gregory go against this examination of his character.

In contrast to the more modern views of the Stanley family during the Wars of the Roses, Shakespeare’s *Richard III* is a prime example of the positive media hype surrounding the Stanleys, only a few generations after the Battle of Bosworth. At the very end of the play Stanley is given the role of fetching the crown ‘from the dead temples of this bloody wretch [Richard]’ and placing it on the brow of Henry Tudor, instructing him to ‘wear it, enjoy it and make much of it.’¹⁶ Though the image of Lord Stanley giving the crown to Henry Tudor after the battle of Bosworth has been repeated by Shakespeare, given the mention of just such an event in the poem ‘Bosworth Felde’,

‘The crown of gold that was bright,
To the Lord Stanley delivered it bee.’¹⁷

¹² Charles Ross, *The Wars of the Roses, a Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976). ,144.

¹³ Michael Hicks, *Richard III* (London: The History Press, 2001).

¹⁴ Philippa Gregory, *The Red Queen* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

¹⁵ Cunningham, *Richard III a Royal Enigma*. ,68.

¹⁶ William Shakespeare, *Richard III* (New York: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1996). ,301. Act V, Scene V.

¹⁷ Hales and Furnivall, *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript Ballads and Romances*. ,258

This poem is very likely to predate the writing of Richard III, and therefore it is entirely possible that Shakespeare received some inspiration from the poem, as he is well known to have researched the history plays with some depth. However, it is clear from Richard III, that at the very least Shakespeare suggests credit for fetching the crown to Tudor, either figuratively or literally, goes to Stanley. One might also bear in mind that Ferdinando Stanley, a descendant of Thomas', was a patron of the Chamberlain's Men, a theatre company associated with William Shakespeare. This may have played a part in the Bard's decision, given that pleasing a patron would increase favour and potentially revenue for the playwright.

There are even later sources which are sympathetic towards Lord Thomas, praising his shrewdness as a useful political tactic. It is impossible to look past the wealth and status that he had achieved at the end of the Wars of the Roses, and it is possible to surmise that, ethics notwithstanding, he chose the best course of action for his family throughout, as a result of that evidence. While the information persists in similarity, the use of different language is telling of Royle's sympathy for Lord Stanley. 'Astutely, Stanley took his force of six thousand men towards Atherstone, to the south-west of Leicester, so that he could claim he was going to join Richard while also being able to throw in his lot with the invaders.'¹⁸ The replacement of 'sly and sneaky', common adjectives regarding Lord Stanley, for 'astute', renders him a laudable character of the conflict, as opposed to being the Lord Blackadder of his day.

Likewise, Michael Bennett has written a great deal on the Stanley family, his account of the preparations for the battle of Bosworth, on both sides, assess the damage that Stanley's refusal to ally with a specific side would have done. With both sides to a certain extent preparing to have Stanley join them, and his forces numbering in the thousands, it was of course pivotal to their planning. While referring to the Stanleys as 'wily', he does counter that 'given the predicament with Lord Strange, as well as the tactical advantages to be derived from not declaring his hand, it would have been foolish to declare openly for the pretender.'¹⁹ While that is indeed likely, it is certainly possible that had he declared openly for the king, their combined forces could have overwhelmed Henry Tudor and changed the course of history. Debate still remains as to the motives of Lord Stanley for backing Tudor, besides the obvious that he was in fact Henry Tudor's step-father. Interestingly, Coward suggests that not only did Lord Stanley himself not take part in the battle, but nor did his army.²⁰ The varying opinions of Stanley actions remain a fascinating topic for discussion to many historians of the Wars of the Roses.

In conclusion, while the greater amount of descriptions of Thomas Stanley involve, to a certain extent, his political fluidity, many refer to him in a positive light. The contemporary ballads have the obvious bias of being written close to the family although they also conform to similar stories. It is possible that the family had these poems commissioned in order to cement their reputation as 'kingmakers' upon the locality in which they held power. In light of the recent rediscovery of Richard III's body, it could be useful to return to the old conformity of belief, which suggested that Shakespeare's play Richard III was merely Tudor propaganda. His body showed evidence of scoliosis, which would cause some slight malformation. Although this has been expanded upon in the play,

¹⁸ Trevor Royle, *The Road to Bosworth Field* (London: Little, Brown, 2009), 410.

¹⁹ Bennett, *The Battle of Bosworth*, 84

²⁰ Barry Coward, *Stanleys, Lords Stanley and Earls of Derby, 1385-1672: The Origins, Wealth and Power of a Landowning Family* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), 13.

it is nonetheless based upon a shred of truth, therefore it could be time to revisit other characters in the Wars of the Roses and reassess their contributions.

Lord Stanley is almost universally presented as calculating and shrewd, though the polarised attitudes towards his behaviour endure. It merely remains as to whether the historian feels that these are positive or negative attributes in a successful political leader. Therefore, with the evidence presented to the historian, the facts remain the same and the morality of the historian themselves must be brought into the equation. As fascinating as it would be to assess the moral compass of every historian mentioned in this article, it is a virtually impossible feat.

Bibliography

- Barnes, Kate. "What Light Can Be Shed by Contemporary Sources in Relation to Lord Thomas Stanley's Personal Military and Political Strategy?": Bangor University, 2012.
- Bennett, Michael. *The Battle of Bosworth*. Stroud: The History Press, 2008.
- Coward, Barry. *Stanleys, Lords Stanley and Earls of Derby, 1385-1672: The Origins, Wealth and Power of a Landowning Family*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983.
- Cunningham, Sean. *Richard III a Royal Enigma*. London: The National Archives, 2003.
- Fenn, John, and Alexander Ramsey, eds. *The Paston Letters*. 2 vols. London: C. Knight & Company, 1840.
- Gregory, Philippa. *The Red Queen*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2010.
- Hales, J.W, and F.J Furnivall, eds. *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript Ballads and Romances*. Vol. 3. London: Spottiswood & Co., 1868.
- Hicks, Michael. *Richard III*. London: The History Press, 2001.
- . *The Wars of the Roses*. London: Yale University Press, 2010.
- Horrox, Rosemary. "'Catesby, William (B. In or before 1446, D. 1485)'." Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4884?docPos=3>.
- Ross, Charles. *The Wars of the Roses, a Concise History*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1976.
- Rowse, A. L. *Bosworth Field & the Wars of the Roses*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1998.
- Royle, Trevor. *The Road to Bosworth Field*. London: Little, Brown, 2009.
- Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*. New York: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1996.