A Note on the Early Career of Sir Edward Woodville

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Among the political misjudgements ascribed to Edward IV in the early years of his reign, his patronage of the family of his queen, Elizabeth Woodville, continues to arouse controversy. Half a century after J.R. Lander first questioned an older consensus that the Nevilles had rightly felt aggrieved by the king’s excessive generosity to his in-laws, particularly in allowing the queen’s sisters a clean sweep of the higher end of the marriage market, the debate continues.1 While in his 1974 biography of Edward IV Charles Ross largely followed Lander’s view, five years later Michael Hicks called some of his conclusions into question, pointing in particular to the king’s evident agency in arranging the marriages of several of his queen’s sisters that followed rapidly after the royal wedding itself.2

These were eye-catching affairs indeed, and the evident bias of the principal chronicle source, the Annales of the Pseudo-William Worcester against the Woodvilles, does not negate the impact of these matches on the aristocratic marriage market, and the ill-will this is likely to have created.3 In October 1464 the queen’s sister Margaret was betrothed to the earl of Arundel’s heir, Lord Maltravers (aged about fourteen). The following January, the twenty-year-old John Woodville was married to the earl of Warwick’s elderly aunt, the dowager duchess of Norfolk. The next tranche of marriages followed in February 1466, not long after the baptism of Princess Elizabeth, the king’s first-born. The eleven-year-old duke of Buckingham, Henry Stafford, married Katherine Woodville; Sir William Bourgchier, son and heir to the earl of Essex, married Anne Woodville; and a further Woodville sister married Anthony Grey of Ruthin, son and heir of the earl of Kent. Finally, in September 1466 the queen’s sister Mary became the wife of William, son and heir of Lord Herbert.4 Two of

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4 Ibid., pp. [783], [785], [786].
Elizabeth Woodville’s siblings, Anthony Woodville, Lord Scales, and Jacquetta Woodville, Lady Strange, were already married when she caught the king’s eye.\(^5\)

In the heat of the debate over the political and economic significance of these marriages, another of Hicks’s observations has sometimes been lost sight of: whatever provision Edward IV made for his new wife’s female siblings, he did remarkably little, indeed almost nothing, for her brothers. The eldest, Anthony, was in any event already amply provided for by his wife’s inheritance, had been summoned to parliament as a baron in her right, and, moreover, had the prospect of eventually succeeding to the hereditary earldom bestowed on his father on 24 May 1466.\(^6\) The second brother, John, was perhaps the Woodville to do best out of his sister’s marriage, and the one who caused contemporaries the greatest chagrin, when he was married to Katherine Neville, a ‘maritagium diabolicum’ that turned the annalist almost apoplectic with indignation.\(^7\) This left three younger Woodville boys, Lionel, Richard and Edward. Along with his brother John, Richard was knighted at his sister’s coronation, but otherwise received no ostensible favours.\(^8\) The relative youth of the two other boys meant that no decision about their future needed to be made immediately. It was, it seems, taken by the early months of 1466. On 10 April of that year, so his register recorded, Bishop John Lowe of Rochester at his manor of Halling

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\text{ordinavit ad primam tonsuram clericalen due filios domini de Ryuers, fratres domine Regine Anglie, quorum nomina sunt hec:}\cr
\text{Leonellus Woodvyll;}\cr
\text{Edwardus Wodvyyle.}\]

If the ecclesiastical career of Lionel Woodville is well documented, the tonsure of his younger brother, who is today chiefly known for his martial exploits in the 1470s and 1480s, has to date gone unnoticed by modern scholars.\(^9\) There was in the first tonsure no absolute commitment to progression to holy orders: it represented little more than a statement of intent, although it did, importantly, confer clerical status. Yet, it seems that in the spring of 1466 Edward, like

\(^6\) \textit{Complete Peerage}, vol. 11, pp. 21-22.
\(^8\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. [784].
\(^9\) Kent Archives Office, Maidstone, Rochester Bishops’ Registers, DRc/R6 (Register Lowe), f. 46v. The joining of the two names in the register entry leaves no doubt that the Edward tonsured here was the queen’s brother of the full blood, and not some otherwise obscure bastard of the same name.
\(^10\) The principal book-length biography of Edward Woodville’s career is Christopher Wilkins, \textit{The Last Knight Errant: Sir Edward Woodville and the Age of Chivalry}, London 2010, and see also the same author’s biography of Sir Edward in the \textit{Oxford Dictionary of National Biography} (hereafter \textit{ODNB}), \textit{sub nomine}.
Lionel, was destined for advancement in the Church. A prebend at Lincoln cathedral (that of Nassington) had already been found for Lionel prior to his tonsure in February 1466, while Edward joined him a year later in March 1467 as prebendary of Leighton Buzzard. The king may even have made a third – abortive – attempt to place a third of his new brothers-in-law in the Church, when (according to the Pseudo-William Worcester) he unsuccessfully attempted to foist Richard Woodville on the knights of St. John in England as their prior provincial in the autumn of 1468.

In terms of Edward IV’s policy towards his in-laws, it thus seems clear that the king had no intention of creating a ‘pride’ of Woodville uncles for his eventual heir. The queen’s sisters could be married into established noble families, and the Woodville earldom of Rivers could pass to Elizabeth’s eldest surviving brother. No other inheritable peerages were to be created – at least in the immediate term – for the king’s new in-laws. If the queen’s relatives were to be accorded a place in the upper house of parliament, this was to be for their life time only (as was the case with Bishop Lionel Woodville, and would have been true of Richard, had he become prior of St. John); the dignity would not pass to their descendants.

Of course, following the bloodletting of 1469-71, the restored Edward IV had to revise his plans. The childless Anthony Woodville was now Earl Rivers, and his heir presumptive was his as-yet unmarried brother, Richard. It may have been at this point that the decision was taken that their brother Edward should withdraw from the Church. On 5 June 1471 Edward’s prebend of Leighton Buzzard passed to his brother Lionel. A year later, he accompanied his brother Anthony to Brittany, and alongside him he jousted at the celebrations for the creation of his nephew, Richard of Shrewsbury, as duke of York. In 1475 he was among the knights dubbed alongside his other nephew, the young prince of Wales, probably before setting out on Edward IV’s French campaign of 1475. The remainder of Sir Edward’s career is well known. By 1480 he was one of the elite group of the knights of the king’s body, and he was thought to be one of Edward IV’s boon companions in the final years of

12 Ibid., p. 81.
16 Michael Hicks, Edward V, Stroud 2003, p. 64.
the reign. In the late spring of 1483, when Richard III took control of the young Edward V, Woodville fled to Brittany. He participated in Henry Tudor’s invasion, and fought on the winning side at Bosworth. The first three years of Henry VII’s reign saw him campaigning in Spain, northern England and Brittany, and he was killed in battle at St. Aubin du Cormier on 28 July 1488.17

Equally well documented is Lionel Woodville’s later ecclesiastical career: before the end of 1467 he had added prebends at Salisbury cathedral and at the royal college of St Mary in Hastings castle to his growing collection of benefices, and he became archdeacon of Oxford in October 1472.18 He was ordained an acolyte on 18 April 1473 by Archbishop Walton of Dublin (standing in for Bishop Rotherham of Lincoln, who was presumably detained by his duties as keeper of the privy seal), and received the orders of deacon and priest from Rotherham in April 1477 and May 1478.19 From 1479 to 1483 he served as chancellor of the university of Oxford, and in January 1482 Edward IV at last provided him to a bishopric, the recently vacated one of Salisbury. He did not enjoy this dignity for long: although he may initially have kept his distance from the political manoeuvres that followed Edward IV’s death, he was drawn into the conspiracies of the autumn of 1483, had to take sanctuary, and was attainted by parliament in early 1484. He died at an uncertain point in the second half of that year.20

The last footnote to the story of Edward IV’s unlucky brothers-in-law was the childless death of Richard Woodville, third and last earl Rivers, in the spring of 1491. Not one of the five brothers had lived beyond the age of forty-three, and when his inquisition post mortem came to be taken a year later, of his numerous siblings only Katherine, the one-time duchess of Buckingham, now married to the king’s ageing uncle, Jasper, Duke of Bedford, survived.21 This was an outcome that Edward IV could not have foreseen; but nor could the king have expected that his son – who had, after all, been born when he himself was just twenty-eight years old – would succeed to the throne as a minor. England’s experience with royal or semi-royal uncles during the minorities of Richard II and Henry VI had not been a uniformly happy one. The notion of ‘Good Duke Humphrey’ who had been murdered by the designs and devices of the dastardly duke of Suffolk might have created in much of the pro-Yorkist chronicle literature of the 1450s and 1460s a positive paradigm for such an uncle, but Edward must nevertheless have been wary of creating for his heir a coterie of powerful maternal uncles to rival his own brothers.

Indeed, the birth of the initial heir presumptive, Princess Elizabeth, in January 1466 raised questions of its own. In spite of the importance attributed by the house of York to its descent from Edward III through Philippa, daughter of Lionel of Clarence, it is hard to imagine that Edward IV’s ambitious brother George, Duke of Clarence, would have stood by while the crown passed to his niece and her husband (as was to happen, albeit in very different circumstances, in 1485), nor is it clear that the English nobility more broadly was as yet ready for a queen regnant, whatever constitutional arrangements Edward III might at one time have envisaged. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that it was only after the birth of Edward IV’s first daughter that the advancement of the Woodvilles really took off. It was in early 1466 that the queen’s sisters married the duke of Buckingham and the heirs to the earls of Essex and Kent, and later that year that a fourth sister married the eventual heir to the earldom of Pembroke. It was in May of that year that the queen’s father was promoted to an earldom, and also in that spring that decisions were taken over the future of her younger brothers. With the birth of Princess Elizabeth, the Woodvilles had become a living part of the royal family tree, and it was time to trim some of its branches. The planned ecclesiastical careers of the two youngest boys would have achieved just that, providing Lionel and Edward with income and status commensurate with their position as the queen’s brothers, while bringing their lines to an end at their own deaths. The same would have been true of Richard Woodville, had he achieved election as prior of St. John. Such an outcome would surely have been acceptable to the earl of Warwick who, if we can believe the Pseudo-Worcester’s Annals, took umbrage at several of the nuptial arrangements of 1464-67, which – as he probably correctly judged – depleted the prospects of his own daughters. It is thus not without historical irony that it was the earl’s own trimming of the Woodville branch of the royal family tree that may have been crucial in Edward Woodville’s return to the power struggles of the secular world, in which he would make his mark after 1483.