

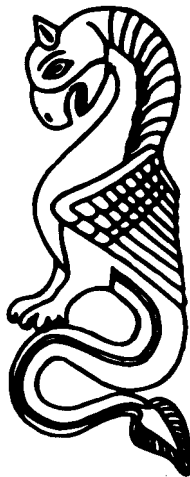
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## The Date and Composition of George Ashby's Poems

John Scattergood

George Ashby died on 20 February 1475 and was buried at Harefield, Middlesex where he owned an estate called Breakspeares. He was for a long time a Clerk of the Signet to Henry VI and Margaret of Anjou, and evidently a committed Lancastrian who, on occasions, suffered because of his political affinities.<sup>1</sup> Though he may have written other works now lost or unidentified,<sup>2</sup> his extant English poems are preserved in two manuscripts: Trinity College Cambridge MS R.3.19<sup>3</sup> contains the unique copy of *A Prisoner's Reflections*, written while he was in the Fleet Prison; and Cambridge University Library MS Mm.IV.42<sup>4</sup> has *The Active Policy of a Prince*, a poem of advice to Edward, Prince of Wales (1453-1471), the son of Henry VI and Margaret, and the *Dicta et Opiniones Diversorum Philosophorum*, a disjointed and incomplete series of pieces of useful advice extracted from ancient writers, with Ashby's English verse translations.<sup>5</sup> The date of *A Prisoner's Reflections* presents no difficulty; in the last but one stanza Ashby says that the poem was:

Wretyn in pryson, in oure lordes date,  
A thowsand foure hundryd syxty and thre,  
Thus occupying me, thys was my fate . . . (I. 337-39)

But the date of the items in MS Mm.IV.42 has proved more problematical. Though she admitted that Ashby's advice to Prince Edward was 'not dangerously original', Mary Bateson was convinced that a number of recommendations in the *Active Policy* (such as those about putting down rebellions and suppressing false conspirators) assumed a Lancastrian on the throne:

it seems scarcely possible that Ashby should write so prosily as he does if another king was in fact reigning in Henry's stead. It

is difficult, therefore, to decide at what date this work was written, whether before the Fleet imprisonment, in perhaps 1460-1, or later, perhaps after the reconciliation of Warwick and Margaret, and the temporary Lancastrian successes of 1470.

She evidently preferred the later date marginally and this is what has become accepted by scholars in general.<sup>6</sup>

However, there is a case for dating the *Active Policy* from 1463, and indeed for assuming that the *Dicta* were written at the same time, for these do not seem to me to constitute a separate item but to be part of the advice Ashby wished to give to Prince Edward.

## I

Many of the recommendations in the *Active Policy* are generalized and unspecific but, as Mary Bateson says, 'between the lines of Ashby's platitudes we may read something of the peculiar character of the period.'<sup>7</sup> It is even possible that two pieces of advice – on the necessity for reviving the clothmaking industry and on the need for sumptuary laws – refer to specific parliamentary legislation.

In 1463 the Commons, worried about the state of the clothmaking industry, petitioned Edward IV in the following terms:

Prayen the Comens in this present Parlement; that where in the tyme of auncien prosperitee of the Reame of Englonde, whan the fame of renommy of the honour and pollicie therof reched into all Christen Londes, sechyng and desiryng the Commodite therof; the making of Cloth of the Wolles of the growyng of the seid Reame, and the ordre and conveyance therof, in the labour of every man and woman required to the seid making, was of such trowth, fynesse and parfitnesse, that the seid Cloth excelled the Cloth of eny other Region or Cuntre and was desired and caried into all Reames of Cristendome; by the which making, every man and woman of resonable age unoccupied, desired to be put, and were put unto labour of some membre of the seid making; wherby ydelnes, and the braunches of misgovernaunce, riot, and vices growyng fro it, were hated,

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rebuked and exiled. And where many yeres it hath been, and in thees dayes it is soo, that the makying of Cloth, and the membres and requisites therunto, have and be of such fraude, deceyte and untrouth, that in other Londes it is not only had and reputed unworthy, but also brent, to the grete rebuke of the seid Reame; and by th' occasion therof, the Cloth of other straunge Londes been brought in grete quantite into the same Reame, and there sold of high and excessive price; shewyng clerely th' offence defaute and untrouth, in makying of Cloth of the seid Wolle, the speciall cause and grounde of the grete ydelnes, and of the myschief therof nowe reigntyng in the seid Reame. And therefore, for the remotion of such ydelnes, and the preferment of Labour and Occupation, such as hath been used by the makying of the seid Cloth, it may please unto your noble grace . . .<sup>8</sup>

And there follow a series of proposals for the regulation of the home clothmaking industry so that a better product is guaranteed, and a number of restrictions designed to cut down the import of foreign cloth. Ashby's stanza on clothmaking appears to have this legislation in mind:

Yif ye wol bryng vp ayen clothe makying,  
And kepe youre Comyns oute of ydelnesse,  
Ye shull therefore haue many a blessing,  
And put the pore people in busynesse,  
Bi the whiche thei shal come to grete swetnesse,  
And robbery lafte by that excercise,  
And strumpery als by this entreprise. (II. 527-33)

Some of the concerns of the petition appear to be reflected in Ashby's phrasing. The worry about 'ydelnes' and 'the speciall cause and grounde of the grete ydelnes' perhaps prompted Ashby's line 'kepe youre Comyns oute of ydelnesse'. The statements 'every man and woman of resonable age unoccupied, desired to be put, and were put unto labour of some membre of the seid makying' and 'the preferment of Labour and Occupation, such as hath been used by the makying of the seid Cloth' may have suggested 'put the pore people in busynesse'. And the fear expressed in the petition about the disorders created by unemployment, 'the branches of mysgovernance, riot, and vices growyng fro it', 'the myschief therof nowe

reignyng in the seid Reame', perhaps caused Ashby to take the view that 'robbery' and 'strumpery' would diminish if the people were working.

Another, related, petition in the 1463 parliament sought the passing of sumptuary legislation and urged its proper implementation:

Prayen the Commyns in this present Parlement assembled, to calle to youre blessed remembraunce that in the dayes of youre moost noble Progenitours, there hath been dyvers Ordenauncez and Statutez made in this youre Reame, for the Apparell and Aray of the Commyns of the same, as well of men as of women, soo that noon of theym shuld use nor were noon inordynat Aray, but oonly accordyng to their degreez. Which Statutez and ordenauncez notwithstondyng, for lak of punysshment and puttyng theym in due execution, the Commyns of this youre seid Reame, as well men as women, have used, and daily usen, excessive and inordynat Arayes, to the grete displeasure of God, enpoverysshing of this youre seid Reame and enriching of straunge Reames and Cuntrees, and fynall distroiyng of the Husbondrie of this youre seid Reame. Wherefore it may please youre Highnes . . .<sup>9</sup>

And there follow a number of proposals for regulating dress. Ashby follows his stanza on clothmaking with one on the need for regulating the array of the commons:

Lete nat the pouer Comyns be dysguised  
Nee haue precious clothe in their Vesture,  
But in their excesse be ther surprised  
And obserue a resonable mesure  
In their arraye, with oute change but tendure,  
Accordyng to degree of Laborours,  
Aftur statute of youre progenitours. (II. 534-40)

Again, the concerns of the petition appear to find an echo in Ashby's words. The reference back in the petition to the legislation of Edward III in 1363, '. . . in the dayes of youre moost noble Progenitors, there hath been dyvers Ordenauncez and Statutez' may have suggested Ashby's 'After statute of youre progenitours.'<sup>10</sup> And the petition's disquiet about 'inordynat Aray' and 'excessive and inordynat Arayes'

and the stipulation that the commons should dress 'oonly accordyng to their degreez' perhaps formed the basis for Ashby's 'excesse . . . In their arraye' and 'Accordyng to degree'.

Both petitions were successful and most of their provisions passed into law.<sup>11</sup> Since this was the only occasion in Ashby's lifetime when sumptuary legislation was passed, and since, in both the 1463 parliament and in the *Active Policy*, this legislation is related to concerns about clothmaking, it seems probable that Ashby wrote the poem at about this time.

## II

It also seems to me that the *Dicta* were written at this time, because it does not appear that they were meant to constitute a separate poem, but were conceived as part of the *Active Policy*.<sup>12</sup>

In her brief introduction to Ashby's poems Mary Bateson does not present the evidence for regarding the *Dicta* as a separate poem, but it may simply have been that the *Active Policy* appeared to have a unity which set it apart from the *Dicta*. After 119 lines of Prologue and Dedication, Ashby has the following stanza, which shows the way in which he intends to divide the *Active Policy*:

Besides whiche thre thinges I wolde meve  
Your high estate to haue in Remembrance,  
Keying them in youre breste and neuer leue,  
For any busynesse or attendance,  
Puttyng youre high estate in assurance,  
That is tyme Passed present and future,  
Keypyng thees three tymes with due mesure. (II. 120-26)

This threefold division is a classical and medieval commonplace in relation to prudential wisdom (indeed, it often appears iconographically as the three eyes of Prudence) which was held to consist in the contemplation of things past, present, and future.<sup>13</sup> The subsequent advice Ashby offers comes under three heads: 'In tempore preterito' (127-217), 'Iam de tempore presenti' (218-372), 'Iam de tempore Futuro' (373-911). The following stanza begins as if it were meant to be a summary, recalling the threefold division of the material earlier:

Things past, remembre & wele diuide;  
Things present, considre & wele governe;  
For thinges commyng, prudently provide. (912-14)

But though it appears to conclude, there is no envoy, and no formal *explicit*, as there was in *A Prisoner's Reflections* (I. 309-43) and the *Dicta* follow immediately, without a formal title, and without the elaborate formal openings characteristic of Ashby's other poems (I. 1-14; II. 1-84).

What is more, the layout of CUL MS Mm.IV.42, which I have recently examined, suggests that the copyist thought he was dealing with material which constituted a single work. The forty-eight folios remaining in the manuscript are written in a single professional hand of the late fifteenth century. On fol. 2r is an account in Latin prose of the contents of the manuscript, which takes up the whole page. It begins 'Presens Libellus compilatus . . .' and room has been left by the copyist for a rubricator to have made a decorative initial capital extending over seven lines of text. In fact, the manuscript was never rubricated, but each division of the text is treated in the same way: on fol. 2v there is a heading 'Hic Incipit Prologus' in roughly the same size script as that used for the text, followed by the stanza beginning 'O maisters Gower, Chaucer & Lydgate . . .' in which space has been left for an initial capital extending over four lines of text; on fol. 4r after the heading 'De Actiua pollecia principis', there is a space reserved for a capital extending over five lines of text; and after each of the headings 'In tempore preterito', 'Iam de tempore presenti', and 'Iam de tempore Futuro', spaces are reserved on fols. 5r, 6v, and 9v for capitals extending over five lines of text. On fol. 19r about half way down appears the heading 'Dicta & opiniones diuersorum philosophorum', followed by text in Latin beginning 'Non exponas te ad dormiendum . . .' in which a space amounting to five lines of text is reserved for the capital letter. In other words, this division of the text is handled just like all the others. There is no indication that the copyist felt he was beginning a new poem at this point, and every indication that he thought he was simply moving on to a new division of the same work.

There are also certain similarities between the *Active Policy* and the *Dicta* which appear to link them. Each is meant to present advice of a politico-moral sort to Prince Edward; each is written in rhyme royal; and each makes use of maxims attributed to famous philosophers and poets of antiquity. In the *Active Policy*, Ashby's practice is sometimes to quote the saying in Latin, and then to base a stanza on it, as at II. 296:

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Docet Regem satisfacere/de stipendiis stipendiariis suis  
Alioquin societas despiciet eum & dominium suum; hec Plato.

And paie youre men their wages & dutee,  
That they may lyue withoute extorcion . . .

and again at lines 331, 352, 653, 695, 793, 821, 828, and 842. This practice is the basis on which the *Dicta* are organized; Latin maxims are followed by stanzas in English, as for example:

Non exponas te ad dormiendum donec consideres opera que  
fecisti eadem die vt scias si errasti, et in quo, et si feceris quod  
non debuisti, et si inueneris quod male feceris, tristeris, et si  
quod bene leteris et par hoc peruenies quod sis circa deum; hec  
Aristotiles.

Euery day before ye go to youre bede,  
Serche wele al youre quidyng by remembrance.  
Yf it be Il, pray god of better spede,  
Yf it be goode, to god be the plesance.  
Thus ye may knowe your selfe in assurance,  
How ye stande with god and with his goode grace,  
And daily better you while ye haue space. (III. 1-7)

And this method of organization is continued throughout the 1263 lines of the *Dicta* before the manuscript breaks off. Moreover, both poems depend on the same sort of source material. Though, at the beginning of the *Active Policy*, Ashby says that he has not seen 'many bokes right sentenciall' and especially no 'gloses sure' (II. 50-52), he does in fact use sources: as Curt Buhler points out, the 'cursing' stanza (II. 688-94) also appears in *The Court of Sapience* and independently in Huntingdon MS HM 144; there are several pieces of proverbial wisdom; and no less than eight extracts from the *Liber de Dictis Philosophorum Antiquorum*, which is the source for practically the whole of the *Dicta*.<sup>14</sup> These similarities and the lack of a formal break between the poems may lead one to suppose that the *Dicta* were conceived as part of the *Active Policy*.

And this supposition receives some support from a long, but much defaced, note on fol. 2r of the manuscript which prefixes its contents. The note begins by



attributing the contents of the manuscript to George Ashby: 'Presens Libellus compilatus, extractus, et anglicatus in Balade per Georgium Asshby . . .'. It mentions the threefold division of the *Active Policy*: 'Dividitur in tribus temporibus, videlicet in tempore preterito, presenti & futuro . . .'. It also mentions the *Dicta*: 'subditorum securitate & bona custodia sub debita et fideli obediencia per aduisamenta edicta & opiniones diuersorum Philosophorum, quorum nomina . . . in tractatu breuiter subscribantur'. But it does not treat the *Dicta* as a separate poem, and it appears that everything in this manuscript is part of a single work. If the word 'compilatus' is used in its precise sense it appears that Ashby sees himself not so much as an 'auctor' but as a compiler – one who gathers together or assembles and then repeats or reports the words of others.<sup>15</sup> And this description would fit the way in which both the *Active Policy* and the *Dicta* are written. It seems to me that the advice in the *Dicta* forms a sort of appendix to the more structured teaching of the *Active Policy*.

### III

If the arguments set out above are convincing, it follows that Ashby should be regarded as being the author of two, not three, extant works – *A Prisoner's Reflections* and the *Active Policy*, which has to be regarded as comprising all that which is contained in MS Mm.IV.42, and which is also incomplete. It also follows, if the suggestions about date are accepted, that the *Active Policy*, like *A Prisoner's Reflections*, was written around 1463.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, though he nowhere says so, it may be that Ashby worked on the *Active Policy* while he was in the Fleet Prison, and that both his extant works are the product of this confinement: this might explain the complaint about lack of access to books (II. 50-54). As in the case of his more illustrious Lancastrian contemporary, Sir Thomas Malory, it may be that the enforced idleness of imprisonment made an author out of somebody who may not have been inclined to literary pursuits in other circumstances.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See *Dictionary of National Biography*, I, 636-37.

<sup>2</sup> See Warton's *History of English Poetry*, edited by W. C. Hazlitt, 4 vols (London, 1871), IV, 76, where it is stated that Ashby was the translator of several French manuals of devotion, ascribed by Robert Copland to Andrew Chertsey in his Prologue to Chertsey's *Passyon of our Lord Jesu Crist* (printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1520). But this assertion is not substantiated.

<sup>3</sup> This manuscript, which comprises poems by Lydgate and others, once belonged to John Stowe; see M. R. James, *The Western Manuscripts in the Library of Trinity College Cambridge: A Descriptive Catalogue*, 4 vols (Cambridge, 1900-04), II, 69-74.

<sup>4</sup> *A Catalogue of the Manuscripts Preserved in the Library of the University of Cambridge*, 6 vols (Cambridge, 1866-67), IV, 299-300.

<sup>5</sup> Ashby is quoted from *George Ashby's Poems*, edited by Mary Bateson, EETS, es 76 (London, 1899; repr. 1965).

<sup>6</sup> *George Ashby's Poems*, p. vi. On the contents page appears 'Active Policy of a Prince ? c. 1470'. See also Rossell Hope Robbins, 'Poems dealing with Contemporary Conditions', in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, edited by J.B. Severs and Albert E. Hartung, 6 vols (1967-80), V, 1510: 'written about 1470 for Edward, Prince of Wales'.

<sup>7</sup> *George Ashby's Poems*, p. v.

<sup>8</sup> *Rotuli Parliamentorum . . . 1278-1503 [Rolls of Parliament]*, 6 vols (London, 1783), V, 501.

<sup>9</sup> *Rolls of Parliament*, V, 504.

<sup>10</sup> For the statute of 1363 see *Statutes of the Realm* edited by A. Luders *et al.*, Record Commission, 9 vols (London, 1810-22), I, 380-82. There was an earlier statute of 1337, but it was less far-reaching and important; see *Statutes of the Realm*, I, 280-81.

<sup>11</sup> See *Statutes of the Realm*, II, 392-95, 399-402.

<sup>12</sup> For an earlier, undeveloped, statement of this position see my *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1971), pp. 285-86. And see Rossell Hope Robbins's cautious and sensible view: 'For other works by Ashby see his translation of *Dicta Philosophorum . . .* which may perhaps be regarded as an extension of his *Active Policy*' (*A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, V, 510).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Cicero's *De Inventione*, II, 53, Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, Prima Secundae, qu. 57, art. 6; Dante's *Convivio*, IV, 27 for the idea about past, present, and future. For the figure of the three eyes, see, for example, Dante's *Purgatorio*, XXIX, 130-32 and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, V, 744-49. For iconographical representations of Prudence looking in several directions at once see Raimond van Marle, *Iconographie de l'Art Profane au Moyen Âge et à la Renaissance*, 2 vols (New York, 1971), I, figs. 24, 54, 78, 79.

<sup>14</sup> Curt Buhler, 'The *Liber de Dictis Philosophorum Antiquorum* and Common Proverbs in George Ashby's *Poems*', *PMLA*, 65 (1950), 282-89.

<sup>15</sup> See A.J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the later Middle Ages* (London, 1984), pp. 100-02 and 193 for this distinction. It is interesting that Ashby defines his writing as a 'rehersall' (II. 54); for the implications of this idea see Minnis, pp. 194-200.

<sup>16</sup> 'Echoes of the *Liber* may even be found in Ashby's *Prisoner's Reflections*. Thus line 187 reads: "Neuyr so mery but some heuynes," which seems to be an adaptation of the line in Socrates (454. 16): "non est sine dolore gaudium" '. (Buhler, 'The *Liber de Dictis Philosophorum Antiquorum*', p. 286, note 28.)