

Is Tudor ideology reinforced or undermined by its representation in the artefacts of the Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin in Fawsley, Northamptonshire?

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The problem which this article seeks to address is the contrasting way in which the Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin in Fawsley Village, Northamptonshire, displays and utilises Tudor iconography, and to establish how and why this came about. Tudor iconography is displayed through diverse media in the church, through its alabaster monuments and carved panelling. The meanings of some of the artefacts, for example the 1534 Knightley funerary monument, are more easily read than others, such as the enigmatic carved panels. Finally the article will examine two examples from the carved panels consisting of a fiddling cat, a cow, dog and moon, and attempt to link them to the ancient rhyme about the cat and the fiddle, which, it has been said, is, amongst other things, a reference to Katharine of Aragon, or 'Catherine la fidèle'.

The rural Midlands county of Northamptonshire owes much of its prosperity to the wool trade and from the Anglo-Saxon period on, the architecture of the county testifies to the wealth and importance of the inhabitants. Private residences still extant include the Elizabethan Renaissance Kirby Hall, the Jacobean mansion at Apethorpe, the late seventeenth-century French-inspired Boughton, Hawksmoor's stately baroque Easton Neston, and the smaller gems of Sir Thomas Tresham – the Triangular Lodge at Rushden and the New Beild at Lyveden. In a ruined state, but all the more engaging for that, is the small Tudor dower house on the Fawsley estate, with its twisted brick chimneys reminiscent of Hampton Court, and whose historical associations with the Knightley family are relevant to this discussion of the artefacts in the parish Church of St Mary in Fawsley. The county's religious buildings are equally impressive; All Saints, Brixworth, for example, is described by Dr David Parsons as 'one of the grandest examples of Anglo-Saxon architecture in England – one might even say Europe'.¹

One such church is the Parish Church of St Mary's, Fawsley. The village of Fawsley has been synonymous with the Knightley family since the purchase of the manor of Fawsley by the family in 1416, and the Knightley family history is closely connected to the ruling monarchs of the period. The earliest features of the church are the two thirteenth-century bays of the arcades. The church was remodelled several times, and is, as Pevsner describes it, 'a veritable mausoleum to the Knightleys' with the earliest of thirteen notable monuments dating from 1516, and the latest from 1856.² Many of the monuments are

¹ Bruce A. Bailey and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Northamptonshire* (London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 139.

² *Ibid.*, p. 365.

outstandingly carved, particularly that of Sir Richard and his wife, wrought in alabaster by Richard Parker of Burton-on-Trent. Though the monument must be contemporary with the iconoclasm such features suffered during the Reformation, it has survived intact. Sir Richard (1455-1534) wears the SS collar, symbol of the victorious Lancastrians. He fought through the Wars of the Roses, survived, and was knighted by Henry VII. It is tempting to think that Sir Richard's support of the Tudor cause accounts for the survival of his monument; furthermore, there are striking similarities between the Knightley monument and the tomb monument of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York by Torrigiano, which was commissioned by Henry VIII for Westminster Abbey and completed in 1517. Henry VIII followed his father in being adept at self-publicity, aimed at establishing the validity of the Tudor dynasty. An indication of this is the inscription which Henry had engraved around his father's tomb:

Here is situated Henry VII, the glory of all the kings who lived in his time by reason of his intellect, his riches, and the fame of his exploits, to which were added the gifts of bountiful nature, a distinguished brow, an august face, an heroic stature. Joined to him his sweet wife was very pretty, chaste and fruitful. They were parents happy in their offspring, to whom, land of England, you owe Henry VIII.

It is tempting to speculate that Parker had somehow been made aware of the Westminster tomb monument, since his design for the Knightley monument closely resembles that of Torrigiano's, albeit on a smaller scale. The effigies are beautifully carved with realistic drapery and minutely detailed accoutrements. Surrounding them at the long sides of the tomb are twelve weepers, representing their four daughters on the north side, and their eight sons arranged in pairs on the south side, under broad, flat ogee arches. The short side at the head of the monument displays the Knightley arms, supported, as in Torrigiano's design, by angels. The short side at the foot of the monument is flush against a wall to which it has been cemented in, and therefore has no ornament. Henry VIII unreservedly exploits the opportunity for his own self-promotion through the monument to his parents ('They were parents happy in their offspring, to whom, land of England, you owe Henry VIII'). The Knightleys could be equally happy in their dynastic achievements, since their children are antecedents of, among others, George Washington, the Queen, and David Cameron.



Figure 1: Richard Parker of Burton upon Trent, *Sir Richard Knightley and his wife Jane* (nee Skenard) c.1534, alabaster (photograph: author's own)

The Knightley monument is completely unambiguous in its message. It is a straightforward memorial to a family, it is utterly clear in its loyalty to the ruling monarch and its pride in dynastic and military achievements. By contrast, the carved panels which now serve as pew ends, are susceptible of no such easy interpretation. They are currently arranged to form the sides of nineteenth-century box pews, but it is not clear what their initial function was, nor where they originated. The plentiful occurrence of linenfold carving suggests a connection with Flanders; and indeed the stained glass supports such a connection, since there are many imported Flemish roundels. However, according to the churchwarden, no proper history of the panels or research into their provenance has been attempted. The current guide to the church dates from 1993 and is cursory in its treatment of the panels, describing them as ‘medieval’, and as giving ‘some insight into domestic beliefs and the attitudes of people at the time’. Not surprisingly in a publication meant for the use of the casual visitor, there is little or no analysis of the iconography, but rather a selective list of what is apparently represented, with no attempt at decoding the significance of each symbol. The author identifies the following panels:

Three wrestlers;

A shield with symbols of Christ’s passion;

A fox preaching to the fowls, which the author interprets as ‘beware of false teachers, especially Franciscan Friars’;

A devil with a spear riding upon a pig, and a unicorn fighting a beast;

The cock crowing, the scourge, the torch, pillar and ropes – an allusion to Holy Week and Christ’s passion;

A cat;
A tree of life with a horned devil behind her – vanity personified;
A man and woman embracing in bed and a pot rack above them;
A fox with a stringed instrument leading huntsmen and a chained bear while another animal eats from a pot;
A skeleton rising from the tomb.³

In fact some of the panels are even more bizarre, enigmatic and intriguing than the above list suggests, and bring to mind comparison with both the emblem books of Alciato, and the marginalia of illuminated manuscripts, in their use of coding and multivalence. However, beginning with the carvings which are susceptible of a more straightforward decoding, the north facing panel on the south aisle is composed of fifteen repeated decorative floral and geometric emblems including trefoils, quatrefoils, double lozenges and ogives. The flower is the Tudor rose; the ogive is the Tudor portcullis. If, as Sydney Anglo suggests, ‘beast and badges ... became symbols not of pedigree but of the dynasty itself’, and were not complicated or subtle, but ‘straightforwardly heraldic; and they were for this reason, especially effective’⁴, it seems likely that the iconography of the carvings is, at its simplest level, part of the drive to establish the validity of the Tudor dynasty, particularly in cases where the property in question had once belonged to someone else. The dynastic hieroglyphs of the Tudors ‘were neither complicated nor subtle; they were straightforwardly heraldic, and they were for this reason especially effective.’⁵ The whole point of badges was that they were immediately recognisable, and the portcullis, rose, dragon and greyhound appear on all things Tudor, both animate and inanimate, from the lowest household retainer to the highest Garter Knight. So the Tudor badges are on seals and coins, in manuscripts, on designs for royal pavilions, plates, armour, cannon, and above all in chapels and palaces.

What is intriguing about the more figurative carvings currently serving as pew ends is that they do not lend themselves easily to a straightforward interpretation, and occasionally the reading that comes to mind is not only sinister, but potentially critical of established order and hierarchy. As with the emblems of Alciato, it would be helpful to have a transcript that explained the action or message of the image. For example, Alciato’s Emblem book of 1531 opens with a heraldic image of a serpent apparently eating a child; the accompanying text explains that the serpent is actually giving birth to a child, and it references ‘the noble lineage of your clan’. Similarly in Alciato, the image of the lute signifies the necessity for all strings to be present on the instrument in order for harmony to be produced. Images are rarely explicitly of a religious

³ Ron Wilson, *A Brief History of Fawsley Church and Park* (Northampton: Wild Boar Books, 2006), p. 8.

⁴ Sydney Anglo, *Images of Tudor Kingship* (London: Seaby, 1992), p. 35.

⁵ *Ibid.*

intent; even the stork, which we know was used in bestiaries as a symbol of the sacrifice of Jesus, is used in Alciato as a device for encouraging human co-operation. The main intention of the emblems and the textual messages seems to be to encourage good governance, social cohesion, and moral behaviour; in this sense the tradition is that of the parable or fable, grounded in civil rather than spiritual dimensions.

Given that the panels are of northern European origin, and their date is likely to be around the time of the Reformation, can we speculate that their sometimes bizarre and uncomfortable images are a commentary not only on the disruption of the civil Wars of the Roses, but also on the Reformation?

What is typical of the culture of the period is the mixing of secular and religious images and references, so that folk lore and myth are evoked alongside Christian ideology and monarchic, dynastic symbols. Again typical is the way in which the deeply serious or spiritual is accompanied and undercut by satirical parallel commentary, as can be found in earlier illuminated manuscripts, and in church grotesques and bestiary books. T. H. White writes interestingly in his commentary on *The Book of Beasts* of Physiologus that ‘a true symbol is not only a badge: it is a brief sermon, a shorthand way of saying something ... a metaphor, a parallelism, a part of a pattern.’⁶ Every possible article in the world, and its name also, concealed a hidden message for the eye of faith before the Reformation. ‘Ask the beast’ Job had said (XII:7) ‘and it will tell thee, and the birds of heaven and they will tell thee’. The meaning of symbolism was so important to the medieval mind that St Augustine stated in so many words that it did not matter whether certain animals existed; what did matter was what they meant: ‘Nos quidquid illud significat faciamus et quam sit verum non laboremus.’⁷

The links between Fawsley and contemporary events surrounding the Tudor Court become more evident as the iconography of the panels is explored. The dragon forms could be a reference to the emblem which Henry VII adopted as king; the cow could refer to the banner of Tarteron ‘bett with a cow’, which was one of the banners he carried to Westminster. The significance of the dun cow is related to its association with Lady Margaret Beaufort and Henry’s claim to the Beaufort line. The dun cow of legend was a savage beast slain by Guy of Warwick, and a huge tusk, probably that of an elephant, is still shown at Warwick Castle as one of the horns of the dun cow. The fable is that it belonged to a giant and was kept on Mitchell Fold, Shropshire. Its milk was inexhaustible, but one day an old woman (or witch) who had filled her pail wanted to fill her sieve (or ‘riddle’) also. This so enraged the cow that it broke loose from the fold and

⁶ T. H. White (ed.), *The Book of Beasts: being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century* (London: Cape, 1954), p. 244.

⁷ Ibid.

wandered to Dunsmore Heath, where it was slain by Guy of Warwick. There are clear depictions of the bear and ragged staff, the heraldic device of the Earls of Warwick.

There are many questions raised by these panels. Why, for example, are they not mentioned in Baker's *History of Northamptonshire*, published in 1830, in which the author describes in minute detail the monuments of Fawsley Church, including the seventeenth-century funeral monument on the north wall? Come to that, why does Baker not describe the 1534 Knightley monument? One could argue that the panels are a late addition, but that hardly can be the case for the alabaster monument.

A further question arises when one contrasts the unambiguous use of iconography on the funeral monuments with the decidedly obscure images on the panels. Were the carvings on the panels a response to the deeply disturbing effects of the Reformation? The iconography is nothing like as complex or subtle as Holbein uses in *The Ambassadors* of 1533, but still conveys a sense that 'the time is out of joint'. One of the few unambiguously Christian references is the pre-Reformation Arma Christi, which appears more than once. Some of the remaining images have, as we have seen, a reference or application to local myth, folklore and legend. Others are of the surprising and shocking nature of the sorts of images that can be found in the marginalia and *bas de page* of fourteenth-century Books of Hours and other illuminated manuscripts which are designed to disrupt the spectator, forcing him or her to stop and think. Examples of such incongruous images are the urinating man at the *bas de page* of Jeanne de Navarre's Book of Hours, the grotesques which combine man, beast and bird in design, and the scatological references in, for example, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, which exemplify the illustrator's delight in the rude.

Given such antecedents, it is possible to see that some of the designs on the Fawsley panels are in fact coded comments on contemporary events. So the carving which features a couple in bed beneath their array of pots and pans may actually be a depiction of a charivari or skimmington, where a couple who are perceived as adulterous or contravening assumed gender norms are chased by local people banging pots, pans, ladles, and making what was also known as 'rough music'.

Could this be a coded commentary on Henry VIII's relationship with Anne Boleyn, and divorce from Katharine of Aragon? Similarly, the carving described as 'three wrestlers' depicts three men in what can be seen as sexual activity; men are portrayed in curious activities, such as licking huge flowers; various creatures are composites of birds and beast and reptiles. A representation of a bird picking out a man's eye seems to suggest that 'all is not as it first appears'.

Which brings us to the two panels illustrating in one, a cow, a moon and a dog; and in the other, two cats playing a fiddle, with pots and pans at the base, and an unidentifiable imaginary creature eating out of a pot. Could this be a reference to the rhyme which goes back to the sixteenth century if not before:

Hey diddle diddle
The cat and the fiddle
The cow jumped over the moon.
The little dog laughed
To see such sport
And the dish ran away with the spoon.



Figure 2: carved oak panel on the north side of the box pew to the south side of the church, artist unknown, date unknown, but thought to be Tudor, 30 × 60cm (photograph: author's own)



Figure 3: carved oak panel on the east side of the box pew to the south side of the church, artist unknown, date unknown, but thought to be Tudor, 15 × 60cm (photograph: author's own)

The remote church of St Mary's, set as it now is in the middle of fields and a landscape designed by Capability Brown, is both delightful and intriguing, and, as this article shows, would benefit from, indeed, demands, further study.

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