

*‘Bede and Merlion and Arsaladone’:
The persistence of short verse prophecies
in late-medieval England*

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But derke it is and wonder thyng
That Marlyn made in his shewyng
But fewe men without wene
Coude vnderstonde what it myght bene

Here, the sixteenth-century *Lytel treatyse of þe Byrth & Prophecye of Marlyn*¹ describes a discourse which would have been familiar to many of its early readers: prophecy. Scraps of verse which claim to speak with the authority of Merlin, as well as Bede, Thomas of Erceldoune and even Chaucer, survive in large quantities from the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. They are often uncatalogued and preserved by happy accident on flyleaves, at the ends of longer texts, or later printed as filler. Like the *factotum* woodcuts on the title page of the *Lytel treatyse*, they were consistently adapted and re-used, to the point that there is not, in most cases, an ‘original’ version or known author.² Critical focus has so far centred upon the longer ‘major monuments’ of prophecy set out by Rupert Taylor in 1911.³ In this study of some shorter works of prophecy, I will examine a broad range of short verse prophecies, in order to understand their relationship with changing political contexts, and with their often unstable authorship figures. Short verse prophecies survive from as early as the thirteenth century into the sixteenth century and beyond, despite acts of 1402 and 1406 which linked them with the Welsh rebellions

¹ STC (2nd ed.) 17841 (London: Wynkyn de Worde, 1510; repr. 1529), image 33, in *Early English Books Online*

<http://eebo.chadwyck.com/search/full_rec?SOURCE=pgthumbs.cfg&ACTION=ByID&ID=99836586&FILE=../session/1470320288_3518&SEARCHSCREEN=CITATIONS&SEARCHCONFIG=var_spel1.cfg&DISPLAY=AUTHOR> [accessed 3rd March 2015].

² Lesley Coote, *Prophecy and Public Affairs in Later Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000), 15; Sharon Jansen, *Political Protest and Prophecy under Henry VIII* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1991), 10.

³ These ‘monuments’ are: *The Six Kings to follow King John*, *The Prophecy of John of Bridlington*, the English *Becket*, the *Erceldoune cycle*, and *The Whole Prophesie of Scotland*. *The Political Prophecy in England* (New York: Columbia University Press), synopsis.

and with Wycliffitism,⁴ and a further act of 1542 which made prophecy a felony.⁵ Their open-ended language stretches to accommodate multiple contexts, and was used to comment upon contemporary social and political issues throughout the late medieval period. I will explore the dissemination and re-use of these prophecies in their changing contexts, and their attribution to marginal figures such as Merlin. Prophecies' circulation in both oral and textual forms is recorded in a range of chronicles, letters and state papers, and by studying these I hope to gain insight into their popularity and continued survival. Prophetic discourse was, in the late medieval period, dangerous: too easily adaptable and too widely disseminated to ignore.

I

A major feature of short verse prophecies is their non-specificity, evident in the textually related Trinity College, Dublin 516 and Magdalene College, Cambridge 1236 (*IMEV* 3943). Their predictions are apocalyptic, 'Then schal the lond of Albyon torne into confusioun!'⁶ and rooted in stock complaints of the world turned upside down, evident in this first stanza from Magdalene 1236:

When feythe fayleth in prestys sawys,
And lordys wyll be londys lawys,
And lechery is prevy solas,
And robbery ys goode purchas.⁷

Priests and lords are shown failing to fulfil their allotted roles in society, while the blunt, urgent juxtapositions of 'lechery [...] solas' and 'robbery [...] goode purchas' build the verse's central image of a world in chaos. This image could be applied to virtually any period of tumult in English history, and this tendency towards generalisation has resulted in several damning assessments of these verses as barely prophetic⁸ and 'rather trite'.⁹ Such criticisms miss the point: the conditions described in Magdalene 1236 appear to be *deliberately* unspecific. Anyone might hear their own complaints echoed in the verse, and yet no specific critique is levelled at the priests and lords of a specific time period or location. The very structure of the 'when – then' formula looks towards the future, without the need for a specific - and potentially dangerous - historical context.

⁴ Helen Barr, *Signs and Sothe: Language in the Piers Plowman Tradition* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1994), 25.

⁵ Janette Dillon, *Language and Stage in Medieval and Renaissance England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 198.

⁶ The Prophecy of Merlin (Trinity College Dublin MS 516 fol. 115r) in *Medieval English Political Writings*, ed. by James M. Dean (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996), 9 (line 1).

⁷ The Prophecy of Merlin (Magdalene Coll. Cambridge MS 1236 fol. 91) in *ME Political Writings*, 10 (lines 1-4).

⁸ Siegfried Wenzel, *Preachers, Poets, and the Early English Lyric* (Guildford: Princeton University Press, 1986) views them as essentially 'complaint' lyrics, 201.

⁹ V. J. Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century, 1399-1485* (London: Blandford Press, 1971), 301.

The verses' movement is made both insistent and easily memorable by the use of rhyming couplets, which work with the familiar complaint features to suggest that they could have been transmitted orally as well as textually. This orality is evident in early, related carols such as 'Vycyce be wyld and vertues lame,/And now be vicyce turned to game'.¹⁰ Stock features of the complaint do not invalidate these verses as prophecy; they make them powerfully versatile. Indeed, their very familiarity and apparent vagueness may have allowed them to more effectively disseminate critiques of specific establishments or events.

Evidence that these verses *were* re-applied to specific contexts over time is written into the extant prophecies themselves. Lesley Coote highlights the important role of 'the copyist, or the audience, many of whom themselves copied prophecies',¹¹ such as vicar John Benet. He compiled Trinity College, Dublin 516, which contains several prophecies, including a version of IMEV 3943 on fol. 115r that ends 'A M CCCC lx and on, few lordes or ellys noone' (vs. 6) before shifting into another well-known piece, 'Longe berde herteles' (IMEV 1820). The date, 1461, is integrated with the rest of the stanza, 'noone' forming the second half of a couplet with the prophesied 'confusioun'; here, context is vital to the verse's structural completeness. What it refers to is unclear, given the turmoil of the period; one possibility, however, is the 'lamentable battell of Tolton, called Palmson feld',¹² which took place on Palm Sunday, 1461. Its tragic combination of civil war and religious celebration seems particularly suited to 'world upside-down' verses such as this. Whether it refers to a full year or a particular event, this verse demonstrates the ease with which prophetic discourse could be adapted to comment on particular contexts.

The inclusion of 'Longe berde herteles' after 'A M CCCC lx' is one example of the way in which scraps of verse were combined and re-combined, drawn from what Paul Strohm calls 'a pre-existing repository or, actually, junkyard of utterances'.¹³ The verse is shorter and more compact than 'When feith fayleth':

Longe berde herteles,
Peyntede hoode wytles,
Gay cote graceles,
Maketh Engeland thrifles.¹⁴

The metonymic 'Peyntede hoode [...] Gay cote', particularly in relation to 'When feith fayleth', seems to refer to the priesthood; other extant versions, for example the

¹⁰ Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Eng. poet. e1 (SC 29734), ff.60v-61 in *Digital Index of Middle English Verse*, DIMEV 6141 <<http://www.dimev.net/record.php?recID=6141>> [accessed 9th March 2015].

¹¹ *Prophecy and Public Affairs*, 1.

¹² Appendix: John Haryngton, LLB.', in *Extracts from the Municipal Records of the City of York, during the Reigns of Edward IV, Edward V, and Richard III*, ed. by Robert Davies (London: Nichols and Son, 1843), 291.

¹³ Paul Strohm, *England's Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation, 1399-1422* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 9.

¹⁴ 'Dublin 516', lines 7-10.

fourteenth-century Cambridge, University Library MS Additional 6860, refer specifically to 'bisschop slaw/prist Wylde'.¹⁵ One of the earliest examples of this verse, a thirteenth-century pencil note in Cambridge, Trinity College B.3.29, reads:

Ald man witles }
 yung man recheles } Aluredus kyng
 Wyman ffameles }
 betere ham were lifles }¹⁶

Here, the final line does not spell out dire consequences for England, but asserts that the offending men and women would be better off dead. This is closer to advice than to prophecy, a discourse alluded to by attribution to King Alfred, whose *Proverbs* circulated during the early Middle Ages. The fluidity of such terms is exposed by the movement of *IMEV* 1820 between advice and prophecy, further demonstrating the adaptability of these short verses. This, in turn, ensured their proliferation, as a kind of 'medieval mass media'.¹⁷

The second verse of Magdalene 1236 is very different, opening with the stock figures 'Gone-away' and 'Courtesy', and continuing:

Then Wallys shall rayke and hastely ryse;
 Then Albeon Skottlonde shall to hem fall;
 [...]
 The rede Irlonde fox shall ryse with all
 With glayvys grownde, and gare men to agryse ¹⁸

As Karen Moranski notes, 'even when a poet identified his animal symbols, those figures could still be taken out of context and used in others,'¹⁹ and this certainly appears to be the case with the 'rede Irlonde fox', no longer positively identifiable. James Dean suggests Robert the Bruce and Red John Comyn, both Scots, as candidates,²⁰ which seems unlikely given the fox's Irishness. Though this prophecy *may* refer to the Bruce Campaign of 1315-18, it could also reference any number of clashes over Scotland. The image of an English Scotland falling to the Welsh, followed by the rising of a warlike Irish fox, 'With glayvys grownde', articulates the general instability of these borderlands' relationship with England, and the threat of

¹⁵ King counsel-less/Bishop loreless' oin *Digital Index of Middle English Verse*, DIMEV 2994 <<http://www.dimev.net/record.php?recID=2994> > [accessed 9th March 2015].

¹⁶ Based on M. R. James' Btranscription, 'B.3.29 ISAIAS GLOSATUS', in *The James Catalogue of Western Manuscripts* <<http://trin-sites-pub.trin.cam.ac.uk/james/viewpage.php?index=383> > [accessed 16th March 2015].

¹⁷ Helen Fulton, 'Arthurian Prophecy and the Deposition of Richard II', *Arthurian Literature* XXII (2005), 64-83 (65).

¹⁸ 'Magdalene 1236', lines 8-12.

¹⁹ Karen Moranski, 'The "Prophetie Merlini", Animal Symbolism, and the Development of Political Prophecy in Late Medieval England and Scotland', *Arthuriana* 8 (1998), 58-68 (65).

²⁰ 'Notes', in *ME Political Writings*, 16-29 (19).

rebellion which they posed. The final line, 'Sevyn shall sytt in youre asyse',²¹ narrows the vision of national apocalypse into direct address; the prophecy remains open to interpretation, while the use of place names and, unusually, personal address, gives it the *appearance* of specificity.

The popularity of prophetic discourse is evident from its persistent re-use into the sixteenth century. These verses are, as I have demonstrated, extremely adaptable; they invite the 'powerful human impulse to particularise the universal'.²² In a letter of 1586, complaining to Lord Burghley of English behaviour at St. Malo, 'A. B.' writes 'Surely Chawcer's provyse never toke so deepe effect yn yngland & specyally in the west parts as now, for theaft ys made good purchase'.²³ 'Theaft' replaces Magdalene 1236's 'robbery', but the basis for this reference otherwise appears to be a very similar, stock phrase, here applied to a specific instance of 'theaft'. Whether A. B. truly believes in its divine inspiration is largely irrelevant; prophecy is, here, a way of claiming authority,²⁴ and in this case attribution to Chaucer suggests literary, rather than truly vaticinal authority. Prophecies are, as Paul Strohm asserts, 'manipulated in such a way as to offer maximum scope' to their readers,²⁵ and the 'scope' of prophecy is such that, as in this case, it can be applied directly to any number of events. Prophetic language bolsters A. B.'s complaint, giving it an authority beyond his own; it is, as this letter shows, a useful discourse.

In 1538, the examination of the vicar Hugh Holland in association with Sir Geoffrey Pole records another phrase much like 'When feith fayleth' to describe Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries: 'commend me to my brother [...] show him the world in England waxeth all crooked, God's law is turned upso-down, abbeys and churches overthrowen'.²⁶ The openness of the prophetic discourse is such that these stock lines can remain true for a Catholic writing in the late 1530s. It is impossible to know whether to add prophecy to the list of Pole's treasons, though as a supporter of the Pilgrimage of Grace he would certainly have had access to them. This phrase may refer specifically to rebel-associated verses, or it may simply be an unconscious echo. Prophecies are, as I have demonstrated, designed to be remembered and reused. Their partial re-emergence in these letters provides documentary evidence of their success in doing so.

II

²¹ 'Magdalene 1236', line 14.

²² Moranski, 'The "Prophetie Merlini"', 61.

²³ 'A. B. to Lord Burghley, July 7th 1586', in Gertrude H. Campbell, 'Chaucer's Prophecy in 1586', *Modern Language Notes* 29 (1914), 195-6 (196).

²⁴ Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), 43.

²⁵ Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, 22.

²⁶ Henry VIII: November 1538 11-15', in *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII* vol. 13.2, ed. by James Gairdner (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1893), 308-353 (309), in British History Online <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol13/no2/pp308-353>> [accessed 10th March 2015].

These short verse prophecies proliferated as a result of their adaptable, memorable form and contents, an open-ended tool for social and political comment. Notably, they have no traceable 'authors'. Indeed, their patchworked forms suggest that the concept of 'authorship' is not truly applicable here; instead, their compilers and copyists - such as Humphrey Newton, a gentleman, or the professional scribe John Shirley - attributed them to figures often either mythical or long dead. In this section, I will discuss the impact of these attributions upon prophecies' survival, and upon the ways in which they were perceived and read.

Helen Cooper writes, 'ascribe your prophecies to someone safely in the past [...] Merlin or Thomas of Erceldoune, or, on occasion, both together - and it was easy to disclaim responsibility',²⁷ and this was evidently the case; however, many attributions also function beyond this. The commonplace book of Humphrey Newton, s.xv²-s.xvi¹, contains one such attribution: a prophecy beginning 'When feith faileth in prestes sawe3', fol. 104r, is headed 'Seynt bede'. This provides a different kind of context; rather than anchoring the prophecy in contemporary issues, it roots its utterance in the past. Authority is conferred by appropriating 'some recognized source of insight',²⁸ in this case the church historian Saint Bede. Although recognised as a scholarly and religious authority, by the late-medieval period the reception of Bede's writings had shifted: his *Ecclesiastical History* was not translated into Middle English until 1565, and was first printed in exile, in Strasbourg (1475-82).²⁹ He appears in John Purvey's *Prologue* to the Wycliffite Bible as an example of a translator: 'if worldli clerkis loken wel here croniclis and bokis, thei shulden fynde that Bede translade the Bible and expounde myche in Saxon that was English either comoun langage of this lond in his tyme',³⁰ a dangerous position to occupy. The attribution of this prophecy to Bede does, certainly, draw upon his authority as a scholar; however, this authority was not necessarily 'safe'.

The names attached to late-medieval prophecies, including Merlin, Bede, and Thomas of Erceldoune, often existed on the margins of political or religious orthodoxy. King Alfred, to whom the Trinity Cambridge B.3.29 verse is attributed, joins Bede in the *Prologue* to the Wycliffite Bible, 'not oneli Bede but also King Alvred [...] translade in hise laste daies the bigynning of the Sauter into Saxon',³¹ while an interpretation of Merlin's prophecy of the *Six Kings* occasioned a deposition against John Hale, vicar of Istylworth: 'Hale called the King the "Molywarppe" that Merlin

²⁷ *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 191.

²⁸ R. E. Lerner, 'Medieval Prophecy and Religious Dissent', *Past and Present* 72 (1976), 3-24 (8).

²⁹ Allen J. Frantzen, 'The Englishness of Bede, from then to now', in *The Cambridge Companion to Bede*, ed. by Scott DeGregorio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 229-42 (236).

³⁰ The Wycliffite Bible: From the Prologue', in *ME Political Writings*, 60-74 (73, lines 357-60.)

³¹ Wycliffite Bible: Prologue', 73, lines 360-62.

prophesied of.’³² These attributions lend an already-politicised edge to these prophecies, and evidently reading or owning these verses was only slightly less dangerous than writing them.

In his letter, A. B. attributes a prophecy to Chaucer, a writer who, in the century after his death, was presented as a part of the court in images such as the *Troilus* frontispiece of Cambridge, Corpus Christi MS 61.³³ John Shirley, who was heavily involved in establishing Chaucer as this ‘Laureall Poete of Albion’,³⁴ included an IMEV 3943 prophecy on fol. 78r of Oxford, Bodleian Library Ashmole 59 alongside texts by Chaucer and Lydgate. He does not attribute the prophecy to Chaucer, but to Merlin,³⁵ however, Chaucerian attributions which appear in later, sixteenth-century verses such as BL Additional 24663: ‘wrytten by Iefferae Chauser’³⁶ perhaps stem from the Chaucerian associations of manuscripts like Ashmole 59 and Cambridge, Trinity College R.3.15. Caxton printed a prophecy from R.3.15 at the end of his edition of *Anelida and Arcite*, and another appears as part of the apocryphal canon in William Thynne’s 1532 printed Chaucer;³⁷ beyond these, almost no printed prophecies survive. Explicit or implied attribution to Chaucer the ‘court poet’, rather than to Bede or Merlin, may have aided the survival of these verses into print.

Longer works such as the *Prophecies of Rhymer, Bede, and Merlin*, as the title indicates, often cite multiple prophetic authorities: ‘Bridlynton to this prophecye grantes/And so did Bede’.³⁸ The accumulation of names, ‘This Merlyn said in propheseye’ (375); ‘This Arsalladoune dyd saye’ (341), might, out of context, seem absurd; however, by creating this network of attributions, the poem internally legitimises its dangerous prediction and the *terminus ad quem* of 1531. The shorter prophecies’ attributions are thus developed into a dangerously powerful consensus, something explicitly stated in another work, *The Marvels of Merlin*:

Then Bede and Merlion and Arsaladone
And Seint Thomas off Canterburye and Bridlynton
All these shall fall to on conclusyon.³⁹

³² Henry VIII: April 1535 11-20’, in *Letters and Papers* vol. 8, ed. by Gairdner (London: HMSO, 1885), 202-18 (214), in *BHO* <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol8/pp202-218>> [accessed 12th March 2015].

³³ Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1993), 22-3.

³⁴ Headnote to *Lak of Stedfastnesse*, quoted by Lerer, 46.

³⁵ The Prophecy of Merlin (Oxford University, Bodleian Library MS 6943 fol. 78r)’, in *ME Political Writings*, 9.

³⁶ When faith fails in priests saws’, in *Digital Index of Middle English Verse*, DIMEV 6299 <<http://www.dimev.net/record.php?recID=6299>> [accessed 5th March 2015].

³⁷ Tim Thornton, *Prophecy, Politics and the People in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006), 40.

³⁸ ‘Prophecies of Rhymer, Bede, and Merlin’, ed. by Jansen, *Political Protest*, 63-90 (lines 286-7).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 91-7 (lines 46-8).

Men such as Bede, Merlin, and the thirteenth-century Scottish prophet Thomas of Erceldoune were already emblematic of dangerous modes of discourse, and this text does not unite them in order to hide a real 'author' or assert its conservatism, but to prophecy the overthrow of the king. Attributions make prophecies *more* of a threat; they allow one to disclaim responsibility, certainly, but they also add their own marginal, dangerous authority to this 'open' discourse.

III

Tim Thornton records that when King James I returned to Scotland in 1617, he was celebrated as the fruition of just such a prophetic consensus: 'the end of al your prophesies'.⁴⁰ This is a politically potent act of re-reading: the transformation of prophecies which had undermined James' predecessors into a confirmation of his rightful kingship. The transmission of prophecy is, as a result of its often anti-establishment uses, well-documented in chronicles and records of the period, and this re-use of prophecy to authorise kingship was not new. Writing in 1401-2 for a French audience, the chronicler Jean Creton discusses a powerfully legitimising belief held by a knight in Henry's retinue, that Merlin and Bede had prophesied the downfall of the king (Richard II):

Ainsi tenoit le dit chevalier ceste prophecie vraie, et y adioustoit graunt foy et creance; car il font de telle nature en leur pays, que en prophecies en fanthones & sorceries croient tous parfaitement; et en usent tous volentiers.⁴¹

[Thus, the said knight held this prophecy to be true and attached great faith and belief to it; for he does what is natural in their country, believing completely and willingly using prophecies, spirits, and sorceries]

Creton believed that Richard II was still alive; evidently, he does not credit the prophecy he discusses with great verity.⁴² By presenting the knight's belief as symptomatic of '*leur pays*', *their* country, he carefully places himself and his audience as superior to the naturally credulous English; the possibility that this prophecy was a shrewd piece of propagandistic re-reading cannot have escaped him, however it did not suit his presentation of the English. Edward Hall, in his *Chronicle* (first printed 1548), similarly belittles the Welsh for their belief in prophecies used by Owain Glyndŵr against Henry, the 'moldewarp' king, in 1405: 'call you these prophecies? nay call them vnprofitable practises. Name you them

⁴⁰ *Prophecy, Politics and the People*, 59.

⁴¹ *French Metrical History of the Deposition of Richard II*, ed. and trans. by John Webb in *Archaeologica; Or, Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Antiquity* 20 (1824), 1-423 (374). I have expanded the abbreviations preserved by Webb's diplomatic transcription, and provide my own translation.

⁴² Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution, 1397-1400: The Reign of Richard II* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 52.

diuinacions? nay name them diabolicall deuises'.⁴³ Hall explicitly criticises the truth-claims made by these 'deuises', while simultaneously acknowledging their king-making, rabble-rousing political power when contextualised. Like Creton's English, Hall's Welsh are a credulous people; Given-Wilson notes the belittling aspect of such a presentation when he asserts that 'political prophecy would come to be seen as both quirky and plebeian'.⁴⁴ This is as much a means of undermining political prophecy and the people who credit it, as it is an acknowledgement of its immense power during the late medieval period.

State records contain further evidence of the circulation and impact of these prophecies, as Jansen has shown in her study of a vicar, John Dobson, who was eventually executed for circulating prophecies. Records of Dobson's deposition reveal the varied, erratic transmission of prophecy in and around the Scarborough area. Dobson had the prophecy from John Borobie, prior of the White Friars in Scarborough, who had borrowed it, extracting two or three 'clausis', presumably those relevant to his interests, and copying them onto the same 'ij shetes of paper afore rehersed'.⁴⁵ Another fragment from a different source, a 'little tale of a cromme and the Cristis crosse rowe', also appeared on these sheets.⁴⁶ The juxtaposition of two prophecies, one partially copied, and a 'little tale' on these sheets echoes the structure of manuscript witnesses like Trinity Dublin 516, compiled by John Benet, vicar of Harlington, in the mid- to late-fifteenth century. As well as evidence that prophecy was considered a real threat, these records provide a significant insight into the transmission of these popular texts. In 1534, a monk, John Broughton, confessed that 'he had shown his master certain prophecies [...] he had a bill of William Dieson of Wynndyndirmire, and another of William Rawlinson of Colton, containing prophecies [...] has conversed with his master, the abbot, of the said prophecies';⁴⁷ another example of 'scribal copying which clearly went hand-in-hand with [...] oral circulation'.⁴⁸ These strands of dissemination: showing, lending,

⁴³ STC (2nd ed.) 12721, (London: Richard Grafton, 1548), image 25, in *EEBO*

<http://eebo.chadwyck.com/search/full_rec?SOURCE=pgimages.cfg&ACTION=ByID&ID=99856251&FILE=../session/1470320060_3046&SEARCHSCREEN=CITATIONS&VID=21780&PAGENO=25&ZOOM=&VIEWPORT=&SEARCHCONFIG=var_spell.cfg&DISPLAY=AUTHOR&HIGHLIGHT_KEYWORD=> [accessed 8th March 2015].

⁴⁴ Given-Wilson, *Writing of History*, 40.

⁴⁵ Jansen, 2.

⁴⁶ 'Christ's Cross Row' was another prophecy associated with the Pilgrimage of Grace. See Michael Bush, *The Pilgrims' Complaint: A Study of Popular Thought in the Early Tudor North* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 14.

⁴⁷ Henry VIII: Appendix, 1533-1534', in *Letters and Papers* vol. 7 (London: HMSO, 1883), 628-42 (642), in *BHO* <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol7/pp628-642>> [accessed 10th March 2015].

⁴⁸ Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 364.

discussing, copying, provide a model for imagining the circulation of prophecies such as those I have discussed, extant on manuscript flyleaves and in margins.

These prophecies' popularity is attributable to their short, memorable structures and stock imagery; they are applicable to as many contexts as possible with minimal editing. This openness makes them a dangerous tool, sharpened further by attribution to marginal figures such as Merlin, both a prophetic authority and, by the late medieval period, associated with rebellion. Extant manuscript witnesses of the *IMEV* 3943 prophecy demonstrate multiple different uses of prophetic discourse as a mode of social and political comment, and thus provide a unique insight into 'popular' engagement with politics and local and national identities in late-medieval England. The circulation of these short verse prophecies was a prosecutable offence, while their authority was appropriated by kings from Henry IV to James I; evidently, either way they were too powerful to ignore.