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The Wilton Diptych and the Absolutism of Richard II*

by

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The Wilton Diptych (in The National Gallery, London) may now, after some years of hesitation on the matter, be considered to be very probably the work of an English artist. Consequently, we may take the painting to be not simply a masterpiece of the International Style but a specifically English masterpiece of the age of Richard II, the king whom it chiefly honors and depicts, and we may expect to find in it a specifically English meaning.

But, despite its acknowledged artistic merit, the Wilton Diptych is still imperfectly understood. There are three fundamental matters to be resolved about the painting: its date, its meaning, and its purpose. The Wilton Diptych was acquired for the nation in 1929; two years later, Maude V. Clarke published the first major study of the Diptych. For the next three decades there ensued a lively and fruitful controversy about the Diptych until the publication, in 1961, of what still remains the most comprehensive study, J. H. Harvey's "The Wilton Diptych: A Re-examination." Although nothing of major importance about the Wilton Diptych has been published since then, the reason may be that Harvey in fact provided what is probably the last piece of evidence necessary for understanding the basic meaning of the Diptych. Interpretation of the painting could perhaps proceed no farther until what was valuable in earlier studies had been recognized and reassembled into a coherent and satisfying pattern.

To turn to the Wilton Diptych itself: in the left panel of the obverse (fig. 1), in a stony and wooded setting, kneels the youngish-looking Richard II (b. 1367; r. 1377-1399; d. 1400) wearing a crown, his hands unfolding as if from prayer. On his cloak he wears a badge, consisting of a recumbent white hart engorged with a golden crown, and around his neck is a collar of broom-cods, *plantae genistae*. (Harvey argues that this is a canting reference to the
Figure 1. Wilton Diptych, left panel (obverse)

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Figure 2. Wilton Diptych, right panel (obverse)
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House of Plantagenet, against the generally accepted opinion that the royal house did not adopt the surname until the fifteenth century. The king's robe is patterned with the white hart within a circle of broom, and, like the pallium used at his coronation, with the figures of displayed eagles. Behind Richard and standing in a row are three saints, each pointing with his right hand to Richard, and each bearing in the left arm the symbol of his sainthood: St. Edmund, the ninth-century king of East Anglia, with the arrow that was the instrument of his martyrdom by the Danes; St. Edward the Confessor, with the ring that was the subject of a famous legend about him; and St. John the Baptist, gaunt and emaciated, with the Agnus Dei, his right hand touching Richard. At the right edge of the panel, behind the figures but unobscured by them, is a large rock whose ledges form a flight of four steps.

In the right panel (fig. 2), in a floral setting, the Blessed Virgin is holding the Christ Child; they are surrounded by eleven angels. The Infant's halo is incised with the nails and the crown of thorns of the Passion, details too faint to be seen in most reproductions of the Diptych. The angels, like Richard in the other panel, wear the collar of broom and the badge of the white hart. At the left, one of the angels is holding a banner that consists of a red cross on a white field: this is the familiar banner of St. George. The angel holding the banner is pointing with a single finger towards Richard, and most of the other angels are looking or pointing at him, as are also Mary and Jesus. The attitude of the Infant's hands emphasizes the banner's importance and suggests that he may have just given it to the angel to present to Richard and also that he is about to bless the king. Richard's unfolding hands in turn suggest that he is about to take the banner and also that he is about to take and kiss the Infant's foot.

On one panel of the reverse of the Diptych (fig. 3) is a large image of the white hart, lying on grass amid flowers and bracken. On the other is Richard's coat of arms, the arms of England quartered with those attributed to Edward the Confessor. These panels do not themselves cast any light on the complex meaning of the panels on the obverse; but, as they display Richard's badge and arms, they demonstrate that the Diptych belonged to the king himself. (It may have been an altarpiece for his private chapel.) More significantly, these panels help to answer one of the principal questions about the Diptych; namely, when was it painted?

The dates that have been proposed for the Wilton Diptych range from 1377, shortly after Richard's coronation, to the early 1400s, shortly after his death. But Maude Clarke showed that it was only in the last five or six years of Richard's reign, from 1394 to 1399, that Richard employed and displayed much of the same heraldry as is found in the Wilton Diptych; Harvey has confirmed Clarke's conclusions with many examples of the same imagery in the same period. Among the evidence they cite are the Confessor's arms,
which Richard adopted in the mid-1390s; the white hart, a large image of which may still be seen in the gallery of Westminster Abbey, which Richard was rebuilding in the 1390s; the angels, who, along with other white harts, adorn Westminster Hall, also being rebuilt then; and the imperial eagles on St. Edmund's cloak, which probably allude to Richard's ambition to become Emperor. Proponents of an earlier date for the Diptych sometimes argue that Richard may have used these heraldic images privately before he did so publicly, but their collocation and prominent use in the Diptych suggest strongly that the picture was painted when they were all being used in the later 1390s to proclaim Richard's regal dignity.

Anne of Bohemia, Richard's beloved first wife, died in 1394. A seventeenth-century engraving of a lost fourteenth-century polyptych previously in Rome shows Richard and Anne together presenting the kingdom of England to the Blessed Virgin as the *Dos Mariae*, Our Lady's Dowry. It is frequently stated that the theme and imagery of this painting are so similar to those of the Wilton Diptych that Queen Anne would likewise have appeared in the Diptych had she been alive when it was painted. But this assumption will not hold if, as will be argued below, the Diptych can be shown to refer to a period in Richard's life before he and Anne were married. On the other hand, the youthful appearance of Richard in the Diptych has led some scholars, most notably Selby Whitteming, to argue that it could not have been painted so late in his reign, at a time when, as the effigy on his tomb erected in the mid-1390s (fig. 4) shows, he certainly wore a beard. But even if the Diptych were painted then, it may refer to events earlier in Richard's life, and if it does, we should expect the Diptych to portray him as rather younger than he was when it was executed, but purposely more mature than he actually was when the events occurred.

Clarke's interpretation of the painting led her to favor a date between 1397 and 1399, Harvey's to between the summer of 1394 and the autumn of 1395, and the one to be offered below to possibly as late as 1398 or 1399; but assignment to sometime within the last five or six years of Richard's reign seems certain.

Explanations of what the Diptych means and why it was painted are equally numerous. Although they are all deficient in some important respects, two of them that are frequently cited approvingly in derivative accounts are examined here.

According to Francis Wormald, the Wilton Diptych is a memorial portrait of Richard II, painted posthumously for his still loyal followers. In this view, the painting depicts the late king's reception or resurrection in heaven, which is represented in the right panel, and the banner itself is a symbol of salvation or resurrection. Wormald's suggestion might be possible if Richard's followers had sought to keep the memory of the late king alive by continuing to display his heraldic devices. But, as
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By permission of the Dean and Chapter of Westminster.

Figure 4. Richard II, Effigy on Tomb (ca. 1395), Westminster Abbey.

Figure 5. Richard II, Coronation Portrait (?), Westminster Abbey.

By permission of the Dean and Chapter of Westminster.
Harvey notes, since the staff supporting the banner terminates in an orb rather than a cross, the banner probably represents not resurrection but rather sovereignty.\(^\text{12}\) (This orb is similar to the one Richard is shown holding in the large portrait [fig. 5], probably a coronation portrait, now in Westminster Abbey.) Further, the presence of Richard's arms on the reverse of the Diptych is almost incontrovertible evidence that the painting once belonged to him.\(^\text{13}\)

But it is Clarke's interpretation that has chiefly shaped opinion about the meaning of the Wilton Diptych. She argued that the painting should be associated with a proposal made around the year 1395 by Philippe de Mézières, the deposed Chancellor of Cyprus, and King Charles VI of France that England and France should undertake a joint crusade against the Turk; that is, around the time that Charles's daughter Isabella was married to the recently widowed Richard. The collar of broom, she contended, was at this time not an English royal insignia but a French one, so that it is depicted in the Diptych as an honorary decoration awarded by one king to another in connection with both the crusade and the marriage. The Instruments of the Passion in the Infant Christ's nimbus in the Diptych are said to refer to the Order of the Passion, which Philippe founded in order to conduct his proposed crusade and which he promoted extensively in his writings. And because the banner of St. George was often used as a crusading banner, Clarke took the banner in the Wilton Diptych not only to be such a one but also to be virtually identical with the one proposed by Philippe for his Order. Although Clarke's arguments have been challenged before, they may be reviewed in detail because her interpretation continues to find favor.

Philippe's banner is depicted in illustrations (reproduced in Clarke's study) in a manuscript presented by Philippe to Richard and containing the proposed Rule for the Order. Both Philippe's banner and the one in the Diptych display a red cross on a white field; that is, they are both the banner of St. George. But the orb at the end of the flagstaff in the Diptych signifies sovereignty; a crusading banner, like the one held by the Lamb in Philippe's, should end in a cross. Philippe's banner, moreover, is rectangular, unlike the one in the Diptych, and at its center is a black circle with points representing the Crown of Thorns and enclosing the Lamb. Clarke found these thorns in the Infant's nimbus in the Diptych, but there is nothing in Philippe's banner corresponding to the nails in the Diptych. She also sought to find the Lamb from Philippe's banner in the Lamb in St. John's arm in the Wilton Diptych, but the Lamb is far removed from both the banner and the Infant Jesus in the other panel in the painting. In the Diptych the Lamb is not a symbol of Christ, as it is in Philippe's banner, but of St. John. The similarities that Clarke drew attention to are not only inexact, they are outweighed by important differences.
In a brief but influential passage, J. J. N. Palmer has seconded Clarke's interpretation. By and large he merely endorses, without new arguments, Clarke's views about the banner and the Instruments of the Passion, but he is even more insistent than she about the collars of broom. He says that the collar was always a French royal badge, never an English one, and offers as proof the fact that it was never awarded by Richard to one of his subjects. Rather, as Clarke suggested, in the Diptych it is said to represent a gift of honor from the French king to the English king, as part of a campaign to reunite the schismatic Church by means of a crusade against the Turk. But the correspondence between the kings that Palmer cites has no specific parallels in the Wilton Diptych; to say, as he does, that the Christian symbolism of the Diptych is identical to that in a certain one of Charles's letters or in Philippe's writings is incorrect. As several writers on the Diptych have shown, there are records of English collars of broom as early as 1392, and the collar in the Diptych is unlike the French one. The brass decoration around the tomb of Sir John Golofre close to Richard's own tomb in Westminster Abbey (and now in the Muniment Room) alternates white harts with broomcods. This collocation is some additional evidence that, like the hart, the broom was a specifically English royal symbol. Even if Harvey's surmise that the surname of Plantagenet was adopted by Richard is incorrect, English royal heraldry consciously imitated or was borrowed from the French at this period; it would appear that the broom was so borrowed.

In any case, even should these four matters—the banner, the Lamb, the Instruments, and the broomcods—be allowed to represent something of what Clarke said they did, they may be taken on consideration to be an insufficient basis as the guiding principles of a rich, complex and even crowded work of art. This interpretation simply omits too much of obvious importance in the Diptych. Further, one would expect, if Clarke's interpretation were correct, that the imagery and symbolism of the Wilton Diptych would be largely, if not predominantly, French and military; but, as will be seen increasingly, the imagery is chiefly English—two of the three saints behind Richard are English, for example—and patently unmilitary. It is difficult to imagine how a French king or a French artist would have known much about St. Edmund or why they would have included him. If the subject of the Diptych is Anglo-French concord for military purposes, surely St. Louis or St. Denis should be in the painting. Moreover, Philippe wrote a great deal about the crusade and the Order; but even in his Epître au Roy Richard, there are no close correspondences between his writings and the Diptych. In particular, Philippe used a great deal of visual imagery, which he elaborated at considerable length and employed frequently as the allegorical ground of his argument, but none of this imagery is reflected in the Wilton Diptych. Finally, for many years Philippe campaigned
vigorously to have the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin established as a major ecclesiastical feast, and her presence in the Wilton Diptych would have given him an opportunity to promote the feast that he would not have neglected; but there is no reference to this subject in the painting. In sum, although we must be grateful to Clarke for firmly establishing the period in which the Wilton Diptych was painted, there are no sound reasons for attributing a French origin to the Diptych, for seeing an allusion to a crusade in the banner, or for associating the Diptych with Philippe de Mézières.

A number of scholars, less influential in this regard than Clarke, have explained the significance of the banner of St. George in a more satisfactory way. By the time of Richard II, St. George was a particularly English saint. He was the patron saint of the Order of the Garter, which was founded by Richard's grandfather and father in the 1340s. Richard himself became Knight of the Garter on 23 April 1377, St. George's Day, and later in the same year, as king, Richard also became Sovereign of the Order. An inventory of the period mentions banners of St. George; since Richard himself never pursued warfare on the continent, these could not have been crusading banners. For all the subsequent centuries, the banner of St. George has been associated with the Garter and with the monarchs of England, and the orb on the flagstaff associates the banner with the sovereignty of England, with the king and his kingship.

More particularly, the symbolic importance of the banner to Richard may be seen clearly in an episode involving its use midway through his reign and in the significance that was attributed to that use for the rest of his life. In late 1387, the five Lords Appellant accused five of Richard's closest advisers of treason. Among the Appellants were Henry, Earl of Derby, and Thomas Mowbray, Earl of Nottingham; among those accused was Robert de Vere, Earl of Oxford and recently created Duke of Ireland, the king's most intimate friend. The Appellants put Richard under virtual close arrest in Westminster, while de Vere, flying the banner of St. George, led troops on the capital to rescue him. At Radcot Bridge, near Oxford, de Vere was defeated by a force commanded in part by Derby; he fled abroad and the next year was condemned to death, in absentia, by the Merciless Parliament. The charges brought against him mentioned specifically that he had flown the banner at Radcot Bridge. Modern historians dwell on the Appellants' ruthlessness during this Parliament, which dismissed, exiled, or executed all of Richard's ministers, advisers, and friends. For Richard, it was clearly the defeat at Radcot Bridge, which had enabled his enemies to assume power, that was the insult and outrage to his royal authority, which had been symbolized by the royal standard. In 1397-98, when Richard was exacting revenge for the wrongs done to him a decade earlier, he punished not so much his Parliamentary opponents as the military leaders at Radcot Bridge,
and he excluded specifically from a general pardon any others who might have fought against him there. Derby, now Duke of Hereford, and Nottingham, now Duke of Norfolk, were of the king's party in 1397; but in 1398, when they accused one another of plotting against the king, according to Hereford's version Norfolk still feared Richard's wrath for "what had been done at Radcot Bridge." And when Henry seized the throne in 1399, among the articles of accusation brought against Richard was that he had allowed de Vere to fly the banner at Radcot Bridge. In the late 1390s, the presence of the banner of St. George in the Wilton Diptych would have signified to Richard his sovereignty, his authority to exercise it, the threats to it from his enemies, and the steps he was taking to re-assert it.

The central meaning of the Wilton Diptych is therefore not difficult to establish. The principal figures in the painting are Richard, the Blessed Virgin, and Jesus; the principal object is the banner of St. George. Richard is about to receive the banner, which represents His kingdom and his special, God-given right to rule that kingdom, and he is about to do homage for it. The banner is being presented not only by God but by His Blessed Mother as her Dowry. The Wilton Diptych depicts the divine bestowal on Richard of sovereignty over England.

This meaning has been seen in the Diptych by some previous commentators. But even among this number none has either convincingly related the rest of the painting to that meaning or, what is not quite the same thing, clearly seen that this is the central and basic meaning of the Wilton Diptych. Joan Evans suggested that the Diptych commemorated either Richard's becoming king in 1377 or, more probably in her view, "the moment in 1389 when Richard assumed complete power by means of a kind of recoronation in St. Stephen's Chapel, with a renewal of homage"; but she was unable to point to anything in the Diptych that connects it specifically to this occasion. Harvey says, but almost in passing, that in the Diptych Richard "seeks from the Blessed Virgin investiture with the governance of England" and, more prominently, that it "symbolizes the core of [Richard's] purpose [in the 1390s]; his rededication to the cause of the English royal prerogative as the instrument of God on earth; and his foundation of a brotherhood leagued with him to achieve his ends." Harvey takes this hypothetical brotherhood to be the central focus of the painting. It was, he says, an "esoteric counterpart of the Order of the Garter" and consisted of Richard and eleven intimate friends, all of whom, he says, wore the badge of the white hart and the collar of broom and are represented in the Diptych by the eleven angels in the right panel. (There is no external objective evidence for the existence of such a brotherhood; it may be doubted that the feminine angels in the Diptych represent masculine knights.) E. W. Tristram likewise sees this pattern and employs it more centrally than most other critics by saying that the Wilton Diptych is "a votive painting
executed on the occasion of Richard's coronation” in 1377, but his proposed date is too early, and though, as will be seen below, the Diptych certainly has much to do with events surrounding the coronation, Tristram’s interpretation is too narrow and fails to take several important matters into account.

Although the principal meaning of the Diptych is expressed by the three principal figures of Jesus, Mary, and King Richard along with the banner, nevertheless, if the painting is to have aesthetic and intellectual unity, the other personages, the saints in the left panel and the angels in the right, though secondary, should contribute to and reinforce that meaning. But generally speaking, in criticism of the Diptych this has not been demonstrated. For Harvey, for example, the angels have some connection with the king’s prerogative, but the saints in the other panel do not. But the secondary personages and objects in the Wilton Diptych can be shown to form a dual pattern of meaning that reinforces the principal meaning and further particularizes it to Richard.

The right panel of the Diptych, with its celestial figures and floral setting, represents heaven; and the left panel, with its terrestrial figures and its stony and wooded setting, represents the earth. The badges and collars worn by Richard in the one panel and by the angels in the other suggest that there is a special association between the king on earth and the angels in heaven. And, as several commentators have noted, the number of these angels is so unusual as to require special explanation. In such pictorial representations we should expect the Virgin and Child to be attended by seven, ten, twelve or twenty-four angels, for such numbers had associations that made them almost compulsory in religious contexts. On the other hand, in medieval symbolism, the number eleven had, in the abstract, few and feeble associations, none of them appropriate here. Martin Conway, however, observed that the chronicle of St. Augustine’s Abbey, Canterbury, records that Richard was in his eleventh year (that is, he was ten years old as we reckon ages) when he became king, and suggested that the eleven angels refer to that fact. On the basis of this single piece of evidence, some other writers, notably E. W. Tristram, have accepted this suggestion. And since in fact a number of other chroniclers—Walsingham, the Westminster Chronicler, Otterbourne and the author of the Brut—also say that at his accession Richard was in his eleventh year, the explanation is persuasive. Just as the sovereignty of England is a gift from heaven, so are the eleven years of life that Richard had enjoyed from his birth till his accession. Harvey’s alternative explanation that the king and the eleven angels represent the number of members of a hypothetical brotherhood based on the Garter is dubious, as the Garter has always had not twelve but twice thirteen members. (And although Richard’s youthfulness is proclaimed proudly here, it was, as we shall see, used as an argument against his suitability as king; this paradox will be resolved below.)
As the angels are attendants to the Virgin and Child in the right panel, so the saints are attendants to the king in the left. These saints are commonly, but loosely, said to be Richard’s “sponsors”—St. Edmund and St. Edward figured in his coronation, for example—but there is still lacking a clear and symbolically consistent explanation of that sponsorship. It is in fact of two specific kinds, both of which are related to the angels in the other panel and to the central meaning of the Diptych.

As we look closely at the features of all four figures in this panel, we come to notice that they bear a close resemblance to one another: they share the same long, narrow face and the same long but not unshapely nose. Joan Evans first observed that St. Edward is undoubtedly a portrait of Richard’s grandfather and predecessor, Edward III, an identification that is universally accepted, and she also proposed, less convincingly, that St. Edmund represents the Black Prince.32 Margaret Galway extended the principle that the saints in the Diptych are portraits of Richard’s male relations by suggesting, on slim evidence, that St. John the Baptist represents John of Gaunt.33 Harvey proposed, more persuasively, that the saints are probably portraits of Richard’s immediate male ancestors, each of whom died at about the age of the corresponding saint.34 St. Edmund represents Richard’s great-grandfather, Edward II, who was deposed and (in Richard’s view) martyred in 1327 and whose canonization Richard long sought.35 St. Edward the Confessor, as Evans had demonstrated, is Edward III. The emaciated St. John is Richard’s father, Edward of Woodstock, the Black Prince, who was stricken by a long and debilitating illness before his death in 1376.36 Further, two of the saints, like Edward II and Edward III, are kings, and one, like the Black Prince, is not. (Likewise, the Baptist was the son of a priest and the precursor of a Priest but not himself a priest.) A comparison of the saints with the only authentic and reliable likenesses of Edward II, Edward III, and the Black Prince, namely the effigies on their tombs (figs. 6, 7, 8), while not conclusive, supports the identifications Harvey suggested. By means of a sort of visual pun, then, the line of saints represents the direct line of male descent to the throne of England that culminated in Richard.

Although, from the brevity of his discussion of the matter, Harvey himself did not attribute a great deal of importance to these identifications, they are of major significance to the Wilton Diptych, for they allow us for the first time to account for all the figures in the painting according to a single coherent plan. The presence of Richard’s ancestors is not simply an act of familial piety. The saints in the left panel commemorate Richard’s progress, through his immediate male ancestors, to the throne. (Since succession required the death of a predecessor, the Black Prince is portrayed in articulo mortis and not, as might be expected, in the prime of life.) The angels, visually and thematically balancing them in the right panel, commemorate
when the progress was completed: in his eleventh year. The central action of the Diptych, to repeat, shows what this progress had as its goal: the divine bestowal of regal authority on Richard and his reverent acceptance of it.

This interpretation is reinforced by a detail that has been all but overlooked in commentary on the Diptych: the natural stone steps at the right edge of the left panel. There are four of them, as there are four personages in the panel, and the angle of the top step points at Richard. By means of another visual pun, the steps repeat the theme of the panel: Richard’s natural, earthly ascent to the throne. The first three represent Richard’s ancestors; the fourth, his own, is a kind of platform that conducts him to the celestial personages and their gifts to him in the other panel.

* * *

Most of the evidence that has been used to this point has been drawn, somewhat eclecticly it may appear, from previous studies of the Wilton Diptych. One final observation must be so borrowed in order to answer a question that arises from what has just been said. For if the saints in the left panel represent Richard’s ancestors, why are they represented in the guise of these saints in particular rather than as themselves? St. Edmund and St. Edward are usually accounted for as saintly royal predecessors of Richard, but what is to be made of St. John, who, somewhat incongruously in so English a context, stands beside them in an identical posture? Virtually the only explanation carrying any conviction was made some time ago by Tristram. He cited several contemporary chronicles that dated the death of Edward III on 21 June 1377, and the accession of Richard the next day, 22 June, by proximity to the great Midsummer feast of St. John the Baptist, 24 June; the closest thing to an official record of the beginning of the new reign, an entry on the Close Rolls noting the delivery of the Great Seal to the custody of the new king, dates the event in just the same way. This would appear to be an appropriate explanation for the presence of the Baptist in the Diptych, which, as we have already seen, has to do with Richard’s accession.

The Wilton Diptych commemorates or reflects a number of public events; further investigation shows that the figure of St. John was probably intended to signify not only Richard’s accession but another, earlier and more important event in his progress to the throne. The Black Prince died on 8 June 1376. A few weeks later, in response to a petition from the Commons, Richard was presented as heir apparent to Parliament by Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury, on “le Mesquardy lendeman Seint Johan”; that is, Wednesday, the morrow of St. John the Baptist’s Day, or 25 June. This was an important political event that was crucial to Richard’s attaining the throne. Richard’s recognition as heir apparent and his succession to the throne almost exactly a year later were events that occurred,
Figure 6. Edward II, Effigy on Tomb, Gloucester Cathedral.
*By courtesy of the Dean and Chapter of Gloucester Cathedral.*

Figure 7. Edward III, Effigy on Tomb, Westminster Abbey.
*By permission of the Dean and Chapter of Gloucester Cathedral.*

Figure 8. Edward of Woodstock (the Black Prince), Effigy on Tomb, Canterbury Cathedral.
*By permission of the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury Cathedral.*
according to the method of dating in official documents and in chronicles reflecting the official account of things, around the feast of St. John; they were both occasions on which Richard’s descent from his father had been affirmed and acknowledged. In the Diptych, therefore, the figure of St. John, with the appearance of the Black Prince in his last years, could serve as a compendious way of showing the connection between the prince and these two important steps in his son’s becoming king.

But for the painting to be consistent, if St. John represents certain important events in Richard’s becoming king, then St. Edmund and St. Edward ought to do so too. In the same Parliament of 1376, the Commons had also petitioned that Richard should, like his father, become Prince of Wales; and, on behalf of the king, Sudbury had promised that the installation would be held “a grant solenmnetee et feste,” with great solemnity and feasting. The installation occurred on the Feast of St. Edmund, 20 November 1376. It will be recalled that the first Prince of Wales was Edward of Caernarvon, the future Edward II; it is Edward II, as we have seen, who is depicted as St. Edmund in the Wilton Diptych. This saint therefore also represents an important event in Richard’s life and is also thereby connected to one of his revered ancestors.

Similarly, the figure of St. Edward may allude to either or both of two events in Richard’s life. Perhaps, given the emphasis on genealogy in the Wilton Diptych, it refers to the date of Richard’s birth, 6 January 1367, the day after the feast of the Confessor (who died on 5 January 1066). Or, more probably in my opinion, the saint may be taken to refer principally not to either of the two liturgical feasts honoring the Confessor (the other was the feast of his translation, 13 October) but to Richard’s coronation, on 16 July 1377; for, as we have just seen, on this level of interpretation the saints make reference to events in this later period.

For a number of reasons Richard’s coronation day may be considered an irregular, occasional feast of that saint, “occasional” in the sense of both infrequent and associated with a particular event. Westminster Abbey, where the coronation was held, is of course a foundation of the Confessor’s; and the coronation chair was kept, then as now, in the Confessor’s shrine, immediately behind the high altar. Since Henry III, this shrine had become the usual burial place for the Plantagenet kings; since then each newborn heir apparent to the throne had been christened Edward (including the Black Prince’s first son, Edward of Angoulême, who was born in 1364 but died in 1371). At his coronation, Richard swore to uphold the venerable laws and traditions established by the Confessor; St. Edward’s cloak, crown, and ring, all of which appear in the Diptych, were used in the ceremony. Finally, 16 July was the Feast of the Relics in the Abbey, and the major relics were those of the Confessor. Richard’s coronation was appropriately symbolized in the Wilton Diptych, as it would have been in his mind, by St. Edward the Confessor.
The three saints in the Wilton Diptych thus represent four (or possibly five) important events that led to the accession of Richard II: his birth on 6 January 1367 (symbolized by St. Edward), his presentation to Parliament as heir apparent on 25 June 1376 (St. John), his creation as Prince of Wales on 20 November 1376 (St. Edmund), his accession itself on 22 June 1377 (St. John), and his coronation on 16 July 1377 (St. Edward). These saints, representing earthly dates and events, are appropriately in the left or terrestrial panel of the Diptych. They are complemented by the angels, who represent the heavenly counterparts of earthly dates, the eleven years of life that had been granted to Richard when he became king. Again, the four steps in the left panel repeat and reinforce the meaning by symbolizing the four steps by which Richard mounted the throne.

The subject of the Wilton Diptych is the royal authority of Richard II. The major figures and the banner define this authority as being derived from God. The secondary figures, the angels and saints, depict the two ways he achieved it: his high ancestry and certain important events in his own life. This interpretation uniquely explains all the important subject matter of the painting by reference to a single theme. It has also called attention to certain visual and thematic relationships not previously noted between the two panels of the Diptych in order to show that even the physical structure of the painting helps to convey its meaning.

* * *

But why was the Wilton Diptych painted? What purpose did it fulfill? In order to answer such questions, it is necessary to review in greater detail the circumstances surrounding Richard's accession.

The two conclusions reached above, that the Diptych was painted in the 1390s and that it commemorates certain events in 1376-77, may appear to be contradictory, and the latter appears to be not very far from Tristram's view that the Wilton Diptych is "a votive painting executed on the occasion of Richard's coronation." In order to resolve the contradiction, we might assume that after some twenty years as king, Richard wished to have his royal ancestry and the events that brought him the crown memorialized in a more elaborate and personal manner than in the Westminster Abbey portrait. But such an explanation is surely insufficient as well as trivial. Further inquiry into the political situation of 1376-77, as well as later in his reign, shows that the matters recorded or alluded to in the Diptych were of profound and permanent significance to the king. They explain, and the Wilton Diptych therefore expresses, the principles of the absolutist theory of monarchy that governed and determined Richard's behavior throughout his reign.45

As the Black Prince lay on his deathbed in the early months of 1376, Edward III was himself old, ill, and moribund (some said senile and
love-besotted), and it was the desire of both the king and the prince that should the prince die first, the young Richard should succeed to the throne. But people, who were probably recalling the woe that England had suffered during the early years of Edward III's own minority, were quoting the biblical warning, "Vae tiби, terra, cujus rex puer est et cujus principes mane comedunt" ("Woe to thee o land, when thy king is a child and thy princes feast in the morning": Eccles. 10.16). The principle of succession by primogeniture was by now firmly established, but did the eldest son of the heir apparent become heir apparent on his father's death? Memories of the long-disused custom of "election" of the monarch were revived. (As such an election did not take place, it is difficult to be certain what might have been intended at the time; apparently, the Lords would have chosen a suitable candidate, and the Commons approved him.) A case could be made for the election of one of the prince's three surviving brothers, especially the eldest, John of Gaunt, second Duke of Lancaster. L

Lancaster was, after the king, the most powerful man in England; while his father and brother lay ill, he had been gradually assuming control of virtually the entire government of the realm; the only thing he lacked, in the spring of 1376, was the crown itself. The opinion held almost universally now is that although the duke would have liked to become king at this time, there is no evidence that he ever sought the crown actively. Walsingham, however, says that Lancaster tried to persuade Parliament to declare him heir presumptive to Richard and adds that there was a rumor ("ut dicebatur") that he intended to poison his nephew. Several continental sources, moreover, report that Lancaster sought the influence of the king of France in having the pope (in Avignon) declare Richard illegitimate. In the absence of more certain evidence, however, these reports are dismissed as groundless; the objections to Richard are considered to have been in the nature of annoying difficulties to be resolved rather than major political obstacles to be overcome.

But the actions and words of both Lancaster and his son Henry after Richard's accession lend credence to the reports of Lancaster's active ambition. In 1394, when the death of Queen Anne caused the matter of the succession to come up again, Lancaster declared in Parliament, in the very presence of the king, that Edmund Crouchback, the founder of the House of Lancaster in the previous century, had been the eldest son of Henry III but that he had been passed over because of his deformity and that the succession should have passed through Lancaster's wife Blanche, daughter of the first duke, to their son Henry. In 1399, when Henry seized the throne, he charged that Richard had been a bastard because of the consanguinity of his parents (both were descendants of Edward I) and because of their clandestine marriage, adding also that in any case the scandalous reputation of Richard's mother, Joan of Kent, made it notorious that
Richard's father was not the Black Prince but rather, as Froissart puts it, "some monk or canon of Bordeaux." Henry also repeated his father's tale about Edmund Crouchback and, according to the fifteenth-century chronicler John Hardyng, produced some pedigrees forged by his father to this effect. The accusations made by both father and son in the 1390s are so similar to those attributed to Lancaster in the 1370s that it may be suspected that John of Gaunt did, after all, try to become king in the earlier period.

The presentation of Richard to the Good Parliament as heir apparent on 25 June 1376 gives some further proof of Lancaster's ambitions, and returns us to the Wilton Diptych. Without analyzing the complex political situation in detail, it need only be said here that the Commons were already quarreling with Lancaster, who in the king's absence was presiding over Parliament and with whom the Lords were in sympathy. That the presentation was one means of opposing Lancaster, by frustrating his ambitions for the crown, has long been recognized (even though it is now denied that he seriously entertained them), and clearly the event was carefully prearranged in collusion between the Commons and the ministers of the Crown; but the episode has not been scrutinized with the care it warrants.

The account appears as follows in the Rolls of Parliament:

The Commons prayed humbly to our lord the king in Parliament that it might please their lord the king, as a great comfort to the whole realm, to have the noble youth, Richard of Bordeaux, the son and heir of the lord Edward, lately the eldest son of our lord and king, and Prince of Wales (whom God save), come before Parliament, so that the Lords and Commons might see and honor Richard as the true heir apparent to the realm. This request was granted, and so Richard came before all the Prelates, Lords, and Commons in Parliament on Wednesday, the morrow of St. John the Baptist's Day, the year aforesaid, by commandment and wish of our lord the king. And the Archbishop of Canterbury, who had been briefed by our lord the king to speak on his behalf, said that although the very noble and mighty prince, the lord Edward, until lately the Prince of Wales, was departed and called to God, nonetheless the prince was as if present, since he had left behind him such a fine and noble son, who is his exact image and likeness; for with this, he said, the wise Solomon agrees. The archbishop said to all
those present that the said Richard, who was true heir apparent in the same way as his noble father the prince, ought to be held by them and by all other subjects of the king in great honor and reverence. And at this the Commons prayed with one voice that it might please their noble liege lord to grant to Richard the name and honor of Prince of Wales, just as the lord Edward had held them while he was still alive. To this, answer was given that this could by no means be done by the Prelates and Lords in Parliament. Rather, it was the prerogative of the king to do so, with great solemnity and feasting. And the Prelates and Lords there promised to serve diligently as mediators with our lord the king on this matter.55

Given Richard’s youthfulness and his unprecedented claim to inheritance, some sort of Parliamentary approval was clearly necessary if Richard were to become king. If the Lords were allowed to deliberate on the matter, however, they presumably might have favored Lancaster and, by reviving the custom of election, chosen him as the next king. The Commons, on the other hand, had no traditional constitutional role in choosing a king except that of acclamation; but the Commons stole a march on Lancaster by petitioning the king not for the creation of Richard as heir apparent but—a crucial distinction—for the presentation to them of one who was, at least in their stated view, already heir apparent and whom they might acknowledge as such by a species of acclamation. When the archbishop, “briefed by . . . the king,” conducted Richard before Parliament, an important concession of a royal prerogative had been made, that of the king’s privilege to choose his successor without the advice of Parliament. This action would cast a long shadow into the reign of Richard II, as one of the foundations of his claim that he was king in his own right, not by consent of any of the organs of government.

But the event was not merely a congratulatory one; rather, it was an occasion for a strong defense of the Crown’s position that Richard should be heir apparent, in answer to objections that we have already met. Both the introductory words of the compiler of the Rolls and Sudbury’s address itself proclaim that the principle of primogeniture entitles Richard to the throne. Richard is the “son and heir of the lord Edward,” who in turn was “the eldest son of our lord and king and [was] also Prince of Wales.” The prince may have died but he was “as if present . . . because he has left behind him such a fine and noble son”; that is, if the heir apparent is dead, his eldest son has become heir apparent. The point was the very one in
dispute; but the archbishop, speaking with the combined weight of royal, ecclesiastical, and spiritual authority, sought to elevate it beyond dispute by speaking of primogeniture as though it were a law of God and nature. In just the same way, the Wilton Diptych traces Richard’s descent to the throne through three eldest sons and heirs and, by depicting them as saints, invests not only all four persons but primogeniture itself with an aura of divine approval.

The importance of this episode has long been recognized, as has Lancaster’s discomfiture at the outcome. What has gone largely unnoticed, however, is the insistence throughout the passage not only that Richard is the rightful heir but that he is the son, and the legitimate son, of the Black Prince. When, early in his address, the archbishop is reported to have said that “the prince… had left behind him such a fine and noble son, who is his exact image and likeness,” the words, with their biblical echoes, were weighty and purposeful. For Sudbury was not simply calling Richard his father’s son; he was offering ocular proof to the Lords, Prelates, and Commons that he was. This is striking and unexpected confirmation at the highest level of the reports, from England and abroad, then and later, of attempts to declare Richard illegitimate. There can be little doubt that it was Lancaster who was making the attempt and that, though modern authorities may doubt that he ever actively sought the throne, in 1376 the king, his chancellor, and the Commons did not. The Wilton Diptych gains a new level of significance from this historical context. The saints in the left panel have the individualized features of Richard’s ancestors and a family resemblance to one another and to him because it had been important for him to be shown not just as the successor to three royal Edwards but, visibly, as their legitimate descendant. Between 1376 and 1399 Lancaster and his son apparently did not seek to revive the charge of illegitimacy against Richard, but they did not forget it. The king would have remembered, in the period when the Diptych was painted, that, despite Lancaster’s schemes, his parentage had been acclaimed and acknowledged in Parliament.56

The presentation of Richard II to Parliament, therefore, was a political event of some importance. No open discussion or debate about Richard’s suitability was allowed to take place. It was sufficient to see that he was the son of Edward of Woodstock and to realize that as the son, he must also be the rightful heir. And if the Primate of All England spoke of Richard as his father’s son, who dared doubt the canonical validity of his parents’ marriage? In this way, not only had the royal authority been employed to ensure Richard’s succession, it had already been extended to him; Lancaster’s hopes or ambitions were frustrated. And, to return to the Wilton Diptych, it was appropriate that the Black Prince should figure as the Baptist in the painting for the saint, on the morrow of whose feast the presentation had taken
place, could be considered to have assisted Richard to take the first important step to the throne.

It has already been said that no account survives of the installation of Richard as Prince of Wales on 20 November 1376, St. Edmund's Day. (Froissart reports, however, that on what may have been this occasion, Lancaster was entrusted with securing written loyalty oaths to the new prince from all lords, prelates, and royal officials, perhaps as a test of his own, newly constrained loyalty.) But the proceedings in the Parliament of the previous June may cast some light on this, the second of Richard’s steps. In the petition of the Commons that Richard should be created Prince of Wales, there may be seen still another assertion of royal prerogative and still more evidence of co-operation between the Commons and the royal ministers. The Lords not having been permitted to choose Edward III’s successor, they would certainly not be permitted to concern themselves in the creation of a royal personage superior to both Houses and subordinate only to the king from whom he would inherit. The Commons’s petition was therefore a further means of frustrating the portion of Parliament, the Lords, among whom Lancaster’s power might lie. At the same time, though, a lofty view of the kingship was being presented, and accepted, as if the office of the Prince of Wales was not only different from that of heir apparent but also a mystery to which the king alone had access and which he alone might confer, one beyond the authority of the magnates. Here too the meaning of the Wilton Diptych is enriched and clarified; for the presence there of Edward II, the first Prince of Wales, in the guise of St. Edmund, would serve to remind Richard of the singularly high station to which, like his father before him, he had been raised by his grandfather—not by Parliament—because of his royal blood alone. St. Edmund might therefore figure in the painting as Edward II, against whom the ultimate species of lese majesty had been committed.

In January 1377, Richard, with his newly acknowledged dignities, presided in Parliament in his grandfather’s place. This Hilary Parliament opened with a sermon by the Chancellor, Adam Houghton, Bishop of St. David’s, that is quoted and summarized at most unusual length in the Rolls and that went beyond the archbishop’s in drawing attention to the merits and prerogatives of the new prince. After counselling love and obedience to the dying king, Houghton continued:

My lords, you can see that our lord the king loves you, for which reason you also ought to rejoice, at being loved by such a noble and gracious lord. For since God has performed his will with our lord the [late] prince, on whom may God have mercy, so you have increasingly desired
the honor and increase of our lord Prince Richard, who is here present and whom may God preserve, as appeared in the previous Parliament.

And our lord the king has fulfilled your wishes, by ordaining and granting to him fully, as is in the king’s power, the said principality of Wales, the duchy of Cornwall, and the earldom of Chester, and he has sent him as his deputy to this Parliament in order to comfort you and rejoice him, in the very manner that Scripture speaks of: “This is my beloved son. This is the desired of all nations.” To him you should, and every one of you is obliged to, do honor and reverence as to your lord and the heir apparent of the kingdom. And you should do him honor in the same manner that the pagans, that is the three kings of Cologne, did to the Son of God. [Those assembled, the bishop went on, should be generous and loving to Richard, as he will be to them, and embrace him like Simeon,] who had long awaited the redemption of Israel, and who had answer from God, that he would not die until he had seen his Savior Jesus Christ, who was the expectation of the people [cf. Luke 3:15].

And when Jesus Christ was presented to him in the Temple, Simeon took him in his arms and said, “Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation” [Luke 2:29-30]. In the same way, you should embrace your noble king in your arms with perfect love, because he has sent to you in such a guise him whom you have desired . . . to obey him in all commandments. For St. Paul says, “Submit yourselves to the king as supreme.” And if your king is sent to you from God, he is the vicar or legate of God on earth. And after him embrace with perfect love our lord the prince, who is here present and whom you have thus desired so long. And now you have seen him with your own eyes, saying, “Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, etc.” Thus you may have what Scripture speaks of, “Peace upon Israel” [Ps. 124(125):5]; and by Israel is meant the
Houghton iterates what Sudbury had said, that the basis of Richard's claim to the throne was his descent from Edward III and the Black Prince. The spirit, if not the precise meaning, of the Wilton Diptych is also caught in the implicit comparisons of the dying Simeon to the dying king and of the young Richard to the child Jesus, and Richard's eminence is thus made to seem due not just to family descent but to divine providence. The reference to the Magi is in part an allusion to the date of Richard's birth, 6 January, the Feast of the Epiphany; the three kings in the left panel of the Diptych, worshipping the Infant in the right, have been taken to allude to this event. Most importantly, all these comparisons were intended to demonstrate that the youthfulness that might have seemed to make Richard an unsuitable king ("Woe to thee, o land") should really be considered an argument in his behalf: just as in the Wilton Diptych the eleven angels, creatures of God, serve not to apologize for the tender age of Richard in the other panel but to proclaim it as part of heaven's plan to make him king. Likewise, the reminiscence of Luke 3:15 is to the Baptism of Christ; here there may be some additional foundation for the identification of the Black Prince with St. John in the Wilton Diptych.

In arguments more certainly related to the Diptych, Houghton asserted the divine basis of royal authority by saying that the King of England was "the vicar or legate of God on earth." These words correspond exactly to the major theme of the Wilton Diptych, in which Richard on earth is being deputized by God in heaven with the banner of St. George, symbolic of England. Houghton concluded by twice saying that "the heritage of God" is England; and this too not only corresponds to but illuminates the painting. In the left panel, Richard has already received his purely human heritage, his kingship—he is already crowned—by virtue of his high ancestry. In the right, God, the Blessed Virgin, and the angels are about to confer on him what earthly ancestry alone cannot: "the heritage of God, which is England."

During this same Parliament, London mobs rioted against Lancaster, burning his palace, the Savoy, and driving him from the city. His duchy was created a palatinate for his lifetime. On 23 April, Prince Richard and Henry of Lancaster were knighted and invested in the Order of the Garter. This was the first time that children too young to bear arms had become K.G.; and although the honor could not have been withheld from Richard, there was probably a special reason for Henry's receiving it. It would appear that Lancaster recognized his unpopularity, acceded to the turn of
political events, and accepted these privileges for himself and his son. With
the exception of the crown itself, the cadet House of Lancaster was being
allowed to proceed almost pari passu with the senior Plantagenet one.

Edward III died on 21 June 1377; on the next day began the reign of
Richard II. The accession is the third of the four principal events in
Richard’s own progress that are symbolically represented in the Diptych.
Although it is of course noted in numerous contemporary sources, it was
not a ceremonious occasion like the others. Its significance was so great and
so obvious that it was not dwelt upon particularly in those places, nor will
it be here. (One of Richard’s first acts as king was to reconcile his uncle
Lancaster with the citizens of London.) The untroubled transition from one
king to another in fact shows that the political efforts that had been made
on behalf of Richard had been effective. And as Richard was coming into
his own, not only as the successor of Edward III but as the acknowledged
heir of the deceased heir apparent around the Feast of St. John, it becomes
still clearer why St. John the Baptist should have been chosen to symbolize
the occasion and to represent the Black Prince in the Wilton Diptych.

The last of the four events comprising Richard’s earthly progress to the
throne was the coronation on 16 July. The coronation ceremony and the
attendant festivities were made exceptionally elaborate in order to impress
the participants, spectators, and populace with the awe and divinity that,
it was being said, hedged this king. Professor McKisack has explained the
significance of the event compendiously, and its innovations from the last
great coronation, that of Edward II:

The oath of 1308 was modified by the addition
of the words iustè et rationabiliter after the king’s
promise to maintain the laws promulgated with
the assent of his magnates on the demand of the
people. The archbishop’s question to the people,
whether they would give their will and consent
to the new king, was placed after instead of before
the oath, thus underlining its significance as an
act of recognition and allegiance to a king de iure
and blurring ancient notions of election. Further,
the rubric directing the peers to touch the crown
after the coronation interprets this symbolic act
as binding the lords to help in easing the burdens
of the royal office. The creation of four new earls
marked the climax of a notable occasion, intended
to demonstrate the sanctity and magnificence
of the hereditary monarchy, the devotion of his
relatives to the boy king, the ending of old
quarrels, and the fair prospects which lay before
the nation under the leadership of the royal
family.\textsuperscript{63}

The “sanctity and magnificence of the hereditary monarchy,” as we have
seen, are precisely what the Wilton Diptych is about; the painting attests,
in the same way as the coronation, that Richard had become king by
virtue of his ancestry, not by election. Likewise, we have seen the associations
between the coronation and the figure of St. Edward the Confessor
in the Diptych.

Richard’s way had thus been threaded for him, from heir apparent to
Prince of Wales to crowned king of England; but in October, upon the opening
of the first Parliament of the new reign, Archbishop Sudbury again took
the opportunity, publicly and for the last time, to explain the the basis of
Richard’s sovereignty. He preached to both Houses and to other dignitaries
on the text “Ecce, rex tuus venit tibi” (“Behold, thy king cometh unto thee”: Matt. 21:5).\textsuperscript{64} At the end of the sermon, Sudbury said,

Now it is come about that our lord the king
here present (whom God preserve) has come into
your presence as your legitimate liege lord, not
solely for one of the three reasons I have given
but for all three reasons together. That is, to
rejoice with you for the noble grace that God has
given to you in the person of him who is your
natural and legitimate liege lord, as has been said,
not by election or any collateral way but by the
legitimate succession of inheritance; for which
reason you are the more bound by nature to love
him perfectly, and humbly obey him; and further-
more to thank God, from whom all grace and
good proceed, especially because he has given you
such a noble lord as your king and governor.\textsuperscript{65}

Now that Richard had become king, attention was drawn not so much
to his ancestors as to his descent from them. Otherwise, Sudbury reiterates
the two themes of Houghton’s address to the Hilary Parliament. God, not
man, made Richard the “natural and legitimate liege lord,” and Richard
owed his succession not to the magnates but to “droite succession de
heritage,” the legitimate succession of (direct) inheritance. Again, the
sentiments are identical to those in the Wilton Diptych, where only celestial
personages and Richard’s ancestors, portrayed as saints, are shown to be
involved in his sovereignty.
As a rule, it is only when a king has acquired his crown with difficulty—whether by force or against strong political opposition—that he justifies his title to it at any length. We recall, for example, how elaborately Henry IV would justify his usurpation from Richard in 1399 and Henry VII's display of Tudor heraldry in Westminster Abbey and in the chapel of King's College, Cambridge. Similarly, the bases of Richard's claim to the throne were: that the monarchy was strictly hereditary; that primogeniture applied even if the crown itself skipped a generation; that Richard was the legitimate son and heir of the Black Prince; that Richard's youth did not disqualify him; and finally that kingship was conferred by God alone, through the agency of primogeniture, and man must therefore not intermeddle in the succession. The number of these arguments and the force with which they were presented over a period of sixteen months are signs that Richard had greater opposition to overcome on his way to the throne than has been generally recognized. But further, as all these arguments on Richard's behalf are reflected in the Wilton Diptych, we come to see that the painting is much more than a pictorial record of how Richard came to be king: it is both a compendious justification of his right to rule and a proclamation of the splendor, majesty, and power of a legitimate king. As such, the Wilton Diptych is a document of great political and historical significance; the fact that it was painted two decades after the events that it commemorates shows that Richard himself knew it to be of such significance.

From his earliest years on the throne, Richard governed, insofar as possible, absolutely and independently, with the assistance of advisers who owed their positions and fortunes to him alone. The ideological basis of this absolutism has been traced to a tradition of political philosophy, largely continental, that kings derived their authority from God alone. But the Wilton Diptych, and the ideas and events behind it, suggest more simply that Richard's conception of the kingship was given to him by the political circumstances of his accession in 1376-77 and conveyed to him, by word and deed, by his father's advisers and his grandfather's ministers. The ideas forming this conception were, it is true, largely medieval commonplace; but they would have made a lasting impression on a child of Richard's tender years, especially as they seemed to be both theologically correct and politically effective. They had, after all, got him the crown.

Richard's view of his kingship led him first to the crisis of 1386-89, when the Lords Apellant maintained (not without justice) that the traditional role of the magnates was being ignored; and they purged Richard's government of everyone they believed had led him into error. But in the 1390s, with greater circumspection, Richard gradually amassed the kind of power he believed was due him. He employed ruthless, efficient ministers who could handle Parliament. He created a number of new peers, especially the infamous "duketti." He brought the major cities to heel with forced loans.
and blank charters. He cowed Parliament with armed force; to glorify his reign, he undertook a building program in Westminster and spread images of the white hart throughout the kingdom; he forced the pope in Rome to support his political and ecclesiastical undertakings; he even aspired to become Emperor. And finally, settling old scores, in 1397 and 1398 Richard exiled or executed all five of the Lords Appellant. Henry of Lancaster was one of those exiled.

The absolutist notions of royal authority that had been asserted in the 1370s and that had failed in the 1380s seemed about to be realized in the 1390s. In this period, therefore, Richard had his conception of the kingship enshrined—the word is precisely apposite—in the Wilton Diptych. In this painting, God, the Blessed Virgin, and Richard’s ancestors are about to confer on him the sovereignty, the absolute, unlimited sovereignty, that, in his opinion, he had literally been born to enjoy. Harvey was correct to say that the Diptych represents Richard’s “rededication to the cause of the English royal prerogative”; but he failed to demonstrate not only the systematic way in which the painting conveys this meaning but that Richard was precisely rededicating himself to the principles of the prerogative that had been asserted as long ago as 1376–77. But suddenly in 1399, Henry returned from exile, deposed Richard, and a few months later had him executed. Although Richard had persisted in his political opinions, at the end they proved to be politically inadequate. Richard’s fall was as classically tragic as Shakespeare would depict it, but one of its causes was commonplace enough: he never changed his mind.

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Although the references to ceremonial occasions and royal personages in the Wilton Diptych lend it something of a public quality, it is nevertheless an essentially private and even esoteric work of art. It is quite different from most other political works of art: for example, Dürer’s Triumphant Arch for Maximilian I or Rubens’s Apotheosis of James I at Whitehall. Such works often employ perplexing or recondite symbolism, but they are nevertheless intended to be understood, if not without effort, by the intelligent and informed spectator. In the Wilton Diptych, on the other hand, although the significance of the central action, the presentation of the banner to the king, is clear enough, the rest of the meaning is, at least by intention, all but impenetrable. The angels in the right panel, for example, are perfectly natural attendants for Jesus and Mary in any painting; and although in the Wilton Diptych the collars and badges bespeak a special association between the angels and the king, the exact nature of that association is far from apparent, for it is both expressed and concealed not by their being angels—which is what we chiefly notice about them—but by their number and the
significance of that number in Richard's life. Likewise, it is obvious who the saints in the left panel are. Especially as two of them are English royal saints, we do not inquire—we are not meant to inquire, we are not meant to discover that these three saints serve the unusual and private symbolic purpose of representing the dates of certain important events that led Richard to the throne. But the saints also represent Richard's ancestors, who, in an earthly sense, enabled him to become king. It is profoundly appropriate that this, the deepest and least apparent level of their significance, should also be the most important one, concealed from the casual observer but not from Richard himself.

In this respect, the stone steps in the left panel may be seen to characterize the Diptych. They seem to be a natural detail in need of neither comment nor explanation, and no acquaintance with traditional lapidary symbolism assists to explain their meaning. They disclose their meaning, as it were, only to someone who already understands it, for their number symbolism, like that of the angels in the other panel, is neither public nor traditional but peculiar to Richard.

As the king's altarpiece, the Wilton Diptych would have been seen by few and understood by fewer still. It proclaimed the religious mystery of the kingship of England. Although this mystery could in some measure be explained to or by a number of people, like the Diptych itself it could be fully comprehended only by Richard II of England, a king and the descendant of kings.67

NOTES

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1. On this matter see especially the discussion and references in John H. Harvey, "The Wilton Diptych: A Re-examination," Archaeologia, 98 (1961), 1-28. Most writers on the subject since 1929 have considered the Diptych to be English, with the important exceptions of M. V. Clarke (see n. 2) and those who accept her interpretation and, somewhat more tentatively, Martin Davies, The French School, 2nd ed. (London: The National Gallery, 1957), 92-101.

The best reproductions of the Wilton Diptych (which takes its name from having been at Wilton House, seat of the Earls of Pembroke, until 1929) are in Harvey's article; in Thomas Bodkin's Gallery Booklet, The Wilton Diptych (London: Percy Lund Humphries, 1947); and, in splendid color, in Joan Evans, "Le Diptyque de Wilton," L'Oeil, No. 54 (Christmas, 1956), 18-23.

Davies provides a compendious and convenient summary of research and criticism to his date and much incidental and historical information.
2. Originally in the *Burlington Magazine*; reprinted in her posthumous *Fourteenth Century Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1937), 272–92, the printing to which reference is made below.

3. See n. 1.


My earlier paper was premature and somewhat exiguous; the present one considerably modifies and expands its findings. The other has been recently cited with approval in Charles T. Wood, “England: 1216–1485,” in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph R. Strayer, Vol. 4 (New York: Scribner’s, 1984), 472–86, at 476 (see n. 41).


7. See the annotations in Whittingham’s bibliography in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (n. 4).


10. In the two articles cited in n. 4.


12. Harvey, *Archaeologia*, 1–2, 13–15, for this and other criticisms of Wormald’s interpretation. See also Davies (n. 1), 98, on the presence of the orb and the absence of a cross.


15. Evans, Archaeological Journal, 4; Harvey, Archaeologia, 9; Wormald, 199.
16. Harvey, Archaeologia, 8–9 and n. 4, 9; cf. Tristram, Month, 2: 26–27.
25. Harvey, Archaeologia, 23.
27. Harvey, Archaeologia, 19.
28. Tristram (n. 6), Month, 1: 385.
29. Cf. Davies, French School, 94 and n. Davies does not, however, accept the Green-Conway–Tristram explanation of their number, that the angels refer to Richard’s age at the time of his accession, because, he says, he cannot see why such a meaning should be so expressed; but this explanation is in harmony with the painting’s principal meaning adduced above.
32. Evans, Archaeological Journal, 3; but it would have been inappropriate for a saint who represented the Black Prince to have been depicted as a king in the Diptych, and Richard’s father should have been the closest to him.
33. Margaret Galway, “The Wilton Diptych: A Postscript,” Archaeological Journal, 107 (1952), 9–14, at 9–11; but three saints who stand beside one another in a line and with their hands pointing right should have another relationship than that of son, father, and son.
34. Harvey, Archaeologia, 21 and n. 4, principally from the correspondence of ages mentioned above. He attaches rather more importance to the identifications in The Black Prince and His Age (n. 4), 146.
36. Cf. the vivid description of his last years by Thomas Walsingham:

Per quinque annos continuos et amplius gravi infirmitate et corporis incommodo laboravit. Revera toto illo tempore, fere singulis mensibus, passus utrumque flexum, seminis videlicet atque sanguinis. Quae infirmitates multotiens eum reddiderunt ita invalidum, ut saepissime obisse a suis famulis credebatur.

37. Galway, Archeological Journal 11, is the sole exception; but for her they lead chiefly out of the right panel into the left.
38. Tristram, Month, 1:385.
39. The entry records the succession as having occurred "vicesimo primo die Junii (videlicet) die Dominica, proxima ante Festum Sancti Johannis Baptiste": Rymer, Foedera (London, 1704-35) VII, 151; cf. Calendar of Close Rolls, 1377-1381, 74.
42. Rotuli Parliamentorum, II, 330.
43. This was the sole interpretation I favored in my earlier study of the Diptych (see n. 4); although we have corresponded about my change of opinion, C. T. Wood (n. 4) is inclined to agree with the earlier opinion.
44. On the coronation see Leopold G. Wickham Legg, English Coronation Records (Westminster: Constable, 1901); see the index under such topics as "Robes, of St. Edward," "Crown, of St. Edward," and "Ring, King's." Cf. Tristram on the connections between the Diptych and the coronation in Month, 1:386-88. The red slippers that St. Edmund is wearing in the Diptych, moreover, represent the red slippers that Richard wore at the coronation.
46. The most famous occurrence is in Piers Plowman, the Prologue to the B version (usually dated 1377). See also Chronicon Aedee Usk, ed. E. M. Thompson (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1904), 3 and 140, and the other contemporary uses cited in M. W. Bloomfield, Piers Plowman As a Fourteenth Century Apocalypse (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1961), 210, n. 5.
47. The fullest account of the period around the accession is Holmes, The Good Parliament; cf. also McKisack, Fourteenth Century, chap. 13.
48. E.g., "There is in fact no good evidence that Lancaster ever did aim at the throne": Holmes, *Good Parliament*, 52.

49. *Chronicon Angliae*, 92.

50. An undated report to the Count of Flanders printed by Kervyn de Lettenhove in Froissart, *Oeuvres* (Brussels 1876–77), VIII, 46–62 (the most circumstantial account); *Chronique des quatre premiers Valois*, ed. Siméon Luce (Paris, 1862), 259; *Istorie et chroniques de Flandres*, ed. Kervyn de Lettenhove (Brussels, 1879), II, 144; and The Anglo-French Negotiations at Bruges, 1374–1377, ed. Édouard Perroy, *Camden Miscellany*, Camden Society, 3rd series, No. 19 (1952), 60. Largely for the sake of narrative convenience, I assume that all these reports antedate the presentation of Richard to Parliament on 25 June 1376, but it would not essentially alter the argument if Lancaster’s ambitions persisted until December or even the following February.


54. I cannot trace the source of this Solomonic saying.


56. An anonymous poem of this period, mistitled “The Death of Edward III” (in *Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, ed. Rossell Hope Robbins, [New York: Columbia UP, 1959], 102–06, 303–04), is actually a skillful piece of royalist and legitimist propaganda, defending Richard’s succession as the continuation of the royal line, praising the Commons for their support of him and implicitly criticizing the Lords (who are not mentioned) for not supporting him. The poem therefore not only helps to confirm the present interpretation of the episode in Parliament but provides evidence that the campaign on Richard’s behalf was being conducted outside Westminster as well.

57. *Oeuvres*, VIII, 384–85; he says that this occurred at a feast held around Christmastime to mark Richard’s installation as Prince of Wales.

58. The first sentence, “Hic est fili us meus dilectus,” is the words of the Father at the Transfiguration (Matt. 3:17, etc.), but the second, “Hic est desideratus cunctis gentibus,” I cannot trace.

59. The anacoluthon is so pointed in the published Rolls.

60. The words are from 1 Peter 2:13, but the speaker recalls Romans 13:1 ff.


64. This is another implicit comparison of Richard to Christ the King, as Matthew
is noting the fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9 by means of the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem.

65. *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, III, 3; text partially also in Chrimes & Brown, *Select Documents*, 114. After the sermon, Lancaster knelt before the king and dared any man to question his loyalty.


67. The *Instruments of the Passion* on the Infant's nimbus in the Wilton Diptych (see the discussions by Davies, *French School*, 98, and by Harvey, *Archaeologia*, 22) have not been accounted for above; as any association of the Diptych with Philippe’s Order of the Passion is unlikely, it has proved impossible to fit them into this interpretation of the painting. Joan Evans, who was equally puzzled by them, nevertheless characterized them in words so apt that they may take the place of an explanation, as "une allusion subtile et recherchée" (*L'Oeil*, 18). They utter this matter better in French.