From the twelfth century to the seventeenth, political prophecy was prominent among English literary genres no less than in English political life. Derived from Welsh poetic tradition via Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Latin History of the Kings of Britain, prophecy reached all social classes. Prophetic texts influenced the decisions of kings, shaped public perception of regnal politics, and landed people in prison (or worse).

While prophecy characteristically took aim at national politics, its language and circulation were always local. Prophecy was overwhelmingly attested in manuscript rather than print, exacerbating its regionalism. Even the exceptions to this generalization prove the point. One of the few printed books of political prophecy was the Whole Prophesie of Scotland, England, & some-part of France, and Denmark. The Whole Prophesie was printed in 1603 to celebrate the accession of a Scottish king to the English throne, a key prediction of English political prophecies. However, the texts of the book arrived in print through significant spatial, temporal, and linguistic mediation. Some of them are revised versions of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century prophecies, and all of them are found in Scots language in one or both of two manuscripts roughly contemporary with the accession of James I of England. These are British Library Cotton Vespasian E.viii and Sloane 1802.

In the remainder of my time, I’d like to turn from Scotland to another area with a longstanding local tradition of prophecy manuscripts: the Welsh Marches. Peripheral to the kingdom of England, eastern Wales and the Marches were central to the production and dissemination of political prophecy in Britain.

Eight multilingual books of English political prophecy survive from the area: four bilingual books in Welsh and English and four trilingual books in Latin, Welsh, and English. They span the late fifteenth to the mid seventeenth centuries. Each book is organized around the genre of
prophecy—a configuration attested in English books after c. 1450. The 1450s make a convenient starting point for the story of English political prophecy in the Welsh Marches. The latest books from this area date from the early seventeenth century, during the final phase of the active production of English political prophecy. The chronological range for this paper, then, is c. 1450-1650, a chunk of literary history spanning the traditional medieval/modern divide. In the book project from which this paper is drawn, I refer to this period as the Age of Prophecy.

To put this group of multilingual manuscripts in context: by my count there are 38 English prophecy manuscripts in all. ‘English’ means prophecy books produced in England and/or containing prophecies in English or Scots. So this clutch of eight prophecy manuscripts from Wales and the Marches makes up a substantial minority of all surviving prophecy books containing prophecies in English. The 30 other books come from all over the island: from Scotland; from Dorset, London, Staffordshire, Yorkshire, and beyond. One can perceive a northward migration of English prophecy book production from the fifteenth century to the seventeenth, though this may be an artifact of the small sample size. Most of the 38 surviving books have not been localized.

All eight of the Anglo-Welsh prophecy books are now held by the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth. The oldest book is Peniarth 50, a trilingual collection initially copied sometime in the 1440s or 1450s. It is one of the two earliest surviving English prophecy books overall, though its texts clearly have ulterior histories, reaching back before the Age of Prophecy. Peniarth 26 is another trilingual prophecy book from the 1450s. The latest books are a trio of early seventeenth-century manuscripts: Llanstephan 119, Llanstephan 136, and the book formerly known as Mostyn 133. Mostyn 133 is a large, trilingual anthology of political prophecies that has gone missing.

Six of the eight books have known localizations. They cluster in northeastern Wales. The outliers are Peniarth 50, from Neath, Glamorgan in southern Wales, and Llanstephan 119, from
Ardudwy, Merionethshire, on the west coast of northern Wales. Peniarth 26 can be localized to Oswestry, Shropshire, near the Welsh border.

In four cases, we know a bit more about the circumstances of these books’ production and early ownership. Predictably, the latest books yield the most supplementary information. The Welsh physician Thomas Wiliems copied Peniarth 94. The gentleman, lawyer, and antiquarian John Jones copied much of Mostyn 133, the missing manuscript. The Welsh poet William Phylip copied Llanstephan 119. And Jasper Gryffyth, warden of Ruthin Hospital, Denbighshire, owned Peniarth 53 around the turn of the seventeenth century. All four men are known antiquarians whose hands can be identified in other fourteenth-, fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and seventeenth-century manuscripts. As often in manuscript studies, texts come down to us dressed in the signs of their own obsolescence. In the early seventeenth century, as the Age of Prophecy was drawing to a close, the texts in these books were beginning to attract proto-scholarly attention. Wiliems, for example, is otherwise known for compiling a massively learned Latin-Welsh dictionary.

Turning from external to internal evidence, the books share a number of texts in all three languages. This is unsurprising. The aesthetic of prophecy books is one of comprehensiveness to the point of duplication. Very often, a single text appears in multiple locations within one volume. The textual contortions of late prophecy books are so fierce, and the books themselves so long, that it is possible to believe the scribes were not conscious of the repetition.

One set of textual connections seems to place three of these books in a single textual tradition. A trio of Middle English verse prophecies appears in the same order in Peniarth 26, Peniarth 94, and Llanstephan 119. These are the Ireland Prophecy, the second revised version of the Prophecy of the Six Kings, and one quatrain excerpted from Thomas of Erceldoune. I’ll now introduce these three poems before circling back to the three books that connect them.
The *Ireland Prophecy* is a political prophecy in English alliterative verse extant in seven fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and seventeenth-century manuscripts. The poem was composed in 1452 or 1453, to judge from probable allusions to John Trevelyan, a minor administrator under Henry VI, and Richard Neville, earl of Warwick. Trevelyan appears as ‘the rook’ and Warwick as ‘the ragged tree’ and ‘the bear,’ after their heraldic badges. The *Ireland Prophecy* poet seems to portray Warwick, like Trevelyan, as a Lancastrian, positioning them “*þe rede baner vnder*” (“under the red banner”). Before the copying of Peniarth 26 in the mid 1450s, this identification was possible only after 1452, when Warwick became visible as a military supporter of Henry, but before summer 1453, when Warwick changed strategy and threw his support behind the House of York. The poem ends with an acrostic that looks to Ireland for the victorious British king. This is likely an allusion to Richard, duke of York and earl of March, Lieutenant of Ireland from 1449. Richard appears earlier in the poem as a northbound ‘falcon,’ after his badge. Yet the poem’s Yorkist sympathies are fully submerged in the conventions of political prophecy. The final sequence, in which the identity of the hoped-for savior is revealed, turns out to be a pastiche of lines and ideas from Geoffrey of Monmouth, the Middle English prose *Brut*, and other bestsellers. The *Ireland Prophecy* survives in three versions of increasing length, all datable to the 1450s.

The *Prophecy of the Six Kings* is a text that underwent multiple linguistic and political transformations over time, documented in an important article by T. M. Smallwood. Begun in Anglo-Norman prose in the early fourteenth century, the *Prophecy of the Six Kings* was translated into English prose as well as English tetrameter couplets in the late fourteenth century. The prose versions traveled embedded within the *Brut* narrative. Smallwood identifies two further revisions to the couplet version, the second of which corresponds to the texts in Peniarth 26, Peniarth 94, and Llanstephan 119. A Welsh prose translation of the *Six Kings* appears in one of our other Anglo-Welsh prophecy books, Peniarth 50. In all versions, the text predicts six kings of Britain represented
as animals: lamb, dragon, goat, boar, ass, and mole. According to Smallwood, the lamb is “quite recognizable as Henry III,” the dragon as Edward I. The goat is possibly Edward II, but thereafter the prophecy exits historical fact and enters the realm of literary imagination. The Prophecy of the Six Kings became entangled with real politics quite dramatically in 1405. In that year, the rebels Owain Glyndŵr, Edmund Mortimer, and Henry Percy made their so-called Tripartite Indenture on condition “that they are the people about whom the prophet speaks, among whom the governance of Great Britain should be divided and apportioned.” The reference is likely to the northern dragon, western wolf, and Irish lion who combine forces to defeat the mole at the end of the Six Kings. This is the “skimble-skamble stuff” that Hotspur complains Glendower is always yammering on about in 1 Henry IV. Shakespeare was alluding to some version of the Six Kings.

Thomas of Erceldoune is a vision/romance/dialogue/prophecy in three ‘fitts’ or chapters of cross-rhymed tetrameter. The poem depicts the narrator’s encounter with an otherworldly queen, who reveals to him the future of Scottish politics. The first fitt builds the romance frame, and the second and third contain the prophecies. Thomas of Erceldoune circulated widely, both in full copies and in short excerpts, throughout the fifteenth, sixteenth, and early seventeenth centuries. Sharon Jansen has analyzed a revision of the poem, the Prophisies of Rymour, Beid, and Marlyng. This later version appears in several sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century manuscripts and in the printed Whole Prophesie of Scotland. Ascribed to the most famed of all insular prophetic authorities, Thomas of Erceldoune captures political prophecy for romance. Its success followed from the poet’s decision to present two popular literary genres in triptych. The choice of tetrameter reflects the poem’s multiple generic commitments radiating outward from romance—tetrameter or octosyllables being the usual vehicle for romance in English as in French. Thomas of Erceldoune employs heavy alliteration, an expression (as in Pearl) of the influence of alliterative verse on tetrameter from the thirteenth century onward. One single quatrain from Thomas of Erceldoune, previously misidentified as
a standalone poem, appears in our manuscripts. This quatrain predicts that a southern bastard will come from the west to redeem Britain.

So in conclusion: what are these three Middle English poems doing in these three Anglo-Welsh prophecy books? First of all, they are giving us insight into textual transmission. Neither Peniarth 94 nor Llanstephan 119 appears to have been copied directly from Peniarth 26 here. Their textual overlap instead implies the existence of multiple lost prophecy books communicating these three texts in this order. These lost books presumably circulated in and around the Welsh Marches. (Interestingly, two other English prophecy books, both of the mid sixteenth century, contain two of these three texts in the same order. One of these other books has been localized to the north of England; the other has not been localized.) The Glyndŵr connection of the Prophecy of the Six Kings suggests the potential for local political meanings for that text. So, too, the fixation of the Ireland Prophecy on the earl of March. In general, it would be easy to believe that the three Middle English poems appear in the seventeenth-century books passively and reflexively. By the time Llanstephan 119 was copied, for example, the alliterative meter had fallen off readers’ prosodic radar; it stood no chance of being understood in practical terms. There is truth to this point of view. By definition, dissemination lags production. But in closing, I would question this distinction itself as it pertains to the books, texts, and localities discussed in this paper. Political prophecy most often circulated beyond the strictures of literary canons or named authors. All three of these shared texts metamorphosed from the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries to the sixteenth and seventeenth. If so, the periodization divides ‘medieval’ texts from ‘early modern’ scribes might turn out to be an unhelpful heuristic for getting to grips with this particular literary archive.
English Political Prophecy in the Welsh Marches, 1450-1650
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Manuscripts

Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales
Llanstephan 119 (early seventeenth c.) (Ardudwy, Merionethshire)
Llanstephan 136 (early seventeenth c.) (Wales)
olim Mostyn 133 (early seventeenth c.) (missing) (Ysgeifiog, Flintshire)
Peniarth 26 (mid fifteenth c.) (Oswestry, Shropshire)
Peniarth 50 (mid fifteenth c.) (Neath, Glamorgan)
Peniarth 53 (late fifteenth c.) (Ruthin Hospital, Denbighshire provenance)
Peniarth 58 (sixteenth c.) (Wales)
Peniarth 94 (late sixteenth/early seventeenth c.) (Trefriw, County Conwy Borough)

London, British Library
Cotton Vespasian E.VIII (late sixteenth c.) (Scotland)
Sloane 1802 (late sixteenth/early seventeenth c.) (Scotland)

People

Thomas of Erceldoune, Scottish laird and prophet (fl. late thirteenth c.)
John Jones, gentleman, lawyer, and antiquarian (d. ?1658) (copied much of olim Mostyn 133)
Owain Glyndŵr, prince of Wales and rebel leader (fl. late fourteenth/early fifteenth c.)
Jasper Gryffyth, warden of Ruthin Hospital (d. 1614) (owned Peniarth 53)
Richard Neville, earl of Warwick (1428-1471)
William Phylip, poet and Royalist (d. 1670) (copied Llanstephan 119)
John Trevelyan, administrator under Henry VI
Thomas Willems, physician (d. ?1622) (copied Peniarth 94)
Richard, duke of York and earl of March (1411-1460)

Texts

The Ireland Prophecy (1450s) (New Index of Middle English Verse 366.5/2834.3/3557.55)
The Prophecy of the Six Kings (late fourteenth c.) (New Index of Middle English Verse 1112)
Thomas of Erceldoune (fifteenth c.) (New Index of Middle English Verse 23.5/365)

Bibliography


