5. First Thoughts:
What kind of people were Richard and Elizabeth?

'Brunetti pulled his mind away from these reflections. It was too easy to read history as you pleased, see what you chose to see in the actions of people and cultures long gone.'

Donna Leon*, Transient Desires, 2021*

I'll start this chapter with a confession. I'm jealous of Henry and Margaret Vavasour. The Vavasours were friends of Richard Redmayn and Elizabeth Aldburgh. They knew their hair colour and heights, their tones of voice, their characters and personalities – whether they were gentle or quick-tempered, selfish or kind, fond or otherwise of their relatives, what made them laugh, whether they were hard-working, generous, intelligent, reliable – or the reverse – all those myriad facets that distinguished Richard and Elizabeth as individual personalities and people.

I can't ever know Richard and Elizabeth as Henry and Margaret knew them but I have begun to build some ideas about their characters, personalities and appearance. These are very much first ideas, necessarily tentative because based on limited evidence, but my sense is that Richard and Elizabeth both had strong and distinctive personalities and were people of determination, commitment and intelligence. They both took pride in their appearance and could be striking figures. Both had a capacity for friendship and Elizabeth appears to have been 'her own woman'. Richard was highly-respected and hard-working.

These qualities are all very positive, which is why I've chosen my opening quotation above as a warning to myself. Commissario Brunetti may be a fictional detective but he's entirely right to say that it's all too easy to read history as we please. I've spent years visiting Elizabeth and Richard's effigies and developing an affinity with them, so it's very tempting to present Richard and Elizabeth as the people I'd like them to be. Hence I need to remember Brunetti's warning but, that said, I hope that by the end of this chapter I'll have persuaded you that these first suggestions are well-founded even though there'll be much more to discover in later chapters.

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I'll begin with the most obvious question – what did Richard and Elizabeth look like? Can I justify my statement that they 'both took pride in their appearance and could be striking figures'? Their effigies at Harewood provide the only evidence but, before I make any suggestions about their appearance, I need to ask whether effigies were actually intended to be realistic likenesses of the people they commemorated? My initial assumption, based on some admittedly cursory reading, was that effigies can't tell us anything about an individual's appearance because most were created in workshops churning out standardised figures, each one very like another.

Then I read Tobias Capwell's book, *Armour of the English Knight 1400-1450,* in which Dr Capwell argues that '*effigies were intended to be as accurate and lifelike as the carver's skill and material would allow*'. Basing his argument on minute observation of armoured effigies throughout the

country, Dr Capwell discovered that the details of armour on effigies were specific to the individual commemorated. Some, for example, reveal wear and tear and repairs that only the owner would have known about. This suggests that carvers were often given very specific instructions about the details expected by clients and sometimes used the individual's own armour as their model.

Dr Capwell's arguments about the precision carving of effigies extend beyond armour. He also concludes that '*the possibility of facial portraiture on effigies is too often dismissed out of hand. Although some effigies … seem slightly blank in the face others do not*.' This is supported by Brian and Moira Gittos in their book *Interpreting Medieval Effigies*, a study of effigies in Yorkshire dating from before 1400. They concluded that carvers were 'acutely interested' in depicting what they saw, based on some remarkable examples of precision and accuracy of carving – individual headwear and hairstyles, a variety of characterful faces and the carving of buttonholes and stitching in ways that were appropriate for different types of clothes and textiles.

Why was there such concern for accuracy? The answer lies in individuals' concern to elicit prayers to speed their souls through purgatory to heaven. In Dr Capwell's words *'effigies were intended to act as a kind of intercessionary lens, focussing memories of the deceased and thus facilitating the success of the prayers on their behalf. This may have been one reason why it was important that an effigy be as realistic and lifelike as possible.'*

Reading all this, I realised that Richard and Elizabeth's effigies might reveal more about their appearance than I'd expected.

So what can Richard Redmayn's effigy tell us? At first glance, the man himself seems invisible. He's wearing armour from head to foot, and his face is largely hidden by his helm and mail hood, but one detail does stand out. His moustache! Richard has a jaunty, sharply barbered moustache, the ends stabbing downward past the edges of his mouth, almost reaching his chin. It's a striking piece of male fashion bravado, one I imagine he was proud of – and would have been even more striking when first painted in colour though we'll never know if that colour was black, brown, fair or, heaven forbid, grey! That moustache must, I think, have been one of Richard's distinguishing features and indicative of his pride in his appearance. Richard lived, after all, in an age of fashionable, distinctive and individual facial hair, worn proudly by 'men about court'!

What persuades me that Richard did wear this style of moustache is that it's clearly different from the more rounded and bushier moustache worn by William Ryther's effigy on the other side of the chancel, even though the two effigies were apparently the product of the same workshop in York. The evidence of the two moustaches (a fine title for a detective mystery?) along with photographs of other moustachioed knights in Dr Capwell's books, reinforces his argument that *'every effigy is unique … [there is] almost no evidence for the use of stock workshop patterns … Each effigy has its own distinctive character and features.*'

Richard's effigy also tells us how he saw himself – his self-image - and how he wished to be thought of and remembered by others. To our eyes, his armoured appearance looks impersonal but it wouldn't have felt at all impersonal to Richard because it reflects his perception of himself as a man of military accomplishment and honour. This would have stood out even more clearly if we had seen

the original painted surfaces. For example, the besagews, the round metal plates which protected the armpits, were likely painted with the Redmayn coat of arms and/or the red cross of St George.

He's also proudly wearing the livery collar presented to him by the king, evidence of his loyalty and service to the Lancastrian kings, Henry IV and Henry V, and of their high regard for his service. The details of the collar would have shone with colour and it's notable that Richard's collar has a distinctive pattern, combining the Lancastrian emblem of the SS pattern with what appears to be a knot. This design not only differs from that worn by William Ryther's effigy a few yards away but is not apparently to be found on any other effigy nationally – more evidence of individuality but also frustrating because if it had been repeated for someone else this might help us understand the meaning and significance of this design.

Armour and collar, together with the Redmayn coat of arms carved and painted on his tomb chest, reveal exactly how Richard thought of himself and wanted to be known, as a man and soldier of high status, of power and significance in his local communities and nationally and very much valued by the nobility and the crown. This knightly figure is a strong reminder of Richard at that tournament at Carlisle, an extremely strong, fit man confident in his physical prowess and appearance. Perhaps this suggests that he didn't fall far short of the height of his effigy which is six feet.

Elizabeth's effigy also portrays her as she wished to be remembered, as a lady of status and style, and gives us a strong sense of how she'd have looked if we'd glimpsed her across a busy room. She's wearing a houppelande, the long, flowing, fashionable dress worn by every lady who was out to impress and made from the most expensive textiles this wealthy family could afford. Expensive too is her wide head-dress, profusely embroidered with five-petalled flowers and she's wearing a necklace with a heart-shaped pendant. There's no reason to doubt this was how Elizabeth dressed. The sculptor may have had her clothes to copy for there are records from another family of a hat being shown to a carver to ensure the accuracy of an effigy. Sadly, no glimmerings survive of the once-bright paint which would have displayed the sumptuous colours of her dress and head-dress and the sparkle of her jewellery and so more truthfully re-created her appearance in life.

Elizabeth also has two small dogs frolicking around her skirts, the bells on their collars almost audibly tinkling. Dogs were a symbol of fidelity, perhaps underlining Elizabeth's fidelity to her family and her religion? She's also wearing what at first glance appear to be rings though they are oddly placed to our eyes, not at the base of her fingers but between or beyond her knuckles, nearer the tops of her fingers. I initially assumed they were rings worn purely for decoration (as, for example, in Jan Van Eyck's portrait of the Arnolfini family or paintings by Rogier van de Weyden) but they may well be prayer rings or rosary beads twining through her fingers, symbols of her religious devotion.

As for Elizabeth's face, she looks placid, even bland but a critical component in the creation of her appearance is missing – colour. That original colouring might well have told us about her hair and eye colour, perhaps revealing the contours of her face and giving a hint of her character because, as Dr Capwell wrote, '*The painting of sculpture was an art in itself, having the ability to add a great deal of life and character to a figure.'* A strong sense of Elizabeth's appearance must have been expected of her effigy for two reasons. One is that those who prayed in the church knew Elizabeth and would have been critical if her effigy had little resemblance to her. Secondly, as I'll explain in a later

chapter, it's likely that Richard initiated and supervised the creation of their effigies and would have wanted as accurate a portrayal of Elizabeth as possible.

These effigies tell us more about Richard and Elizabeth than I originally thought – elements of their appearance, individuality and style are visible. Standing alongside their effigies, it's easy to imagine Elizabeth striding along, her dogs frisking around her, and Richard smoothing his moustache before entering a room for a meeting. Their effigies do suggest they were people who took pride in their appearance – as was expected of people of their status – and for those insights we are greatly indebted to the anonymous craftsmen who carved the alabaster so skilfully.

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Now for Richard and Elizabeth's friendship with Henry and Margaret Vavasour. The Vavasours lived at Hazelwood castle, twelve miles south-east of Harewood, perhaps a couple of hours ride away. The main evidence for their friendship is Henry's will, made in 1413. The will is short and typical of many of the period, containing bequests to local churches, to relatives and servants. As we'd expect, Henry left the bulk of his estate to his wife Margaret and a gold ring containing a diamond to his sister-in-law, but what's interesting from our perspective is that Henry also made bequests to Richard and Elizabeth Redmayn. He left Richard a grey horse, one of four horses he left to male friends and relatives, and he left Elizabeth a gold ring. Elizabeth was the only woman other than relatives and servants to receive a bequest. I think it's safe to conclude from this that the Vavasours and the Redmayns were friends.

Identifying that friendship feels quite a triumph, as the sources don't often give us a sense of friendships. We can compile lists of men whom Richard knew from membership of commissions, as a Knight of the Shire and from military campaigns but, as we all know, we can spend a lot of time with people in working environments without establishing friendships. However the evidence of the strength of the relationship between the Redmayns and the Vavasours (and there's other evidence I'll return to later) does remind us again of the humanity of Elizabeth and Richard, they they had the personal qualities to inspire liking, conviviality and affection.

Further evidence of Elizabeth's capacity for friendship comes from a second will, this one dating from 1399 and made by Sir Thomas Roos whose family lived at Ingmanthorpe near Wetherby, just nine miles from Harewood. Amongst his bequests, Sir Thomas left Elizabeth a book, the *Legenda Sanctorum*, a popular collection of saints' lives and again, as in Henry Vavasour's will, Elizabeth was the only woman friend to receive a bequest in the will.

Can I tease anything else out from these bequests to Elizabeth? Given that the Vavasour and Roos families lived near to Harewood it's likely that they'd known Elizabeth's family as well as Elizabeth herself for a long time. However, what's intriguing is that, firstly, neither man left anything to Elizabeth's sister Sybil and, secondly, as noted above, Elizabeth was the only female friend mentioned in either will. It seems that both families were particularly close to Elizabeth, hence my suggestion that Elizabeth was a woman who inspired affection amongst her friends.

Moving on from questions of friendship, the bequest of the *Legenda Sanctorum* strongly suggests that Elizabeth was literate though this isn't at all surprising for a woman of Elizabeth's status. She had to read to oversee her household accounts and all the wider issues she dealt with in her husbands' absences. She may well also have been able to write but her wealth meant that she had clerks to write for her. Even some of the most personal letters written by members of the Paston family later in the 1400s were written (though not composed) by clerks.

The *Legenda Sanctorum* (also known as the Golden Legend) was a highly popular collection of stories recounting the lives of saints together with chapters about the major religious festivals. First compiled in the mid-1200s, its popularity owed a good deal to it not being overly detailed and to it being in relatively simple Latin. Given that it was the custom to read aloud rather than silently, Elizabeth may have read it aloud herself or listened while someone else read it. The book may also have circulated amongst other women of her status who lent books to each other, a form of reading circle or book club. The popularity of the *Legenda* is attested by the fact that over a thousand manuscript copies survive – a huge number for a medieval text – and because, when printing developed in Europe in the mid-15th century, it was printed in almost every European language and was one of the first books printed by Caxton in England. Elizabeth's possession of a manuscript copy suggests that her religious conviction was strong and orthodox, unsurprising given that she and Sybil were responsible for the rebuilding of All Saints Church at Harewood. By happy chance there's a 15th century copy of the *Legenda Sanctorum* in the library of the University of Leeds, the nearest major library to Harewood castle. If only this was Elizabeth's copy!

Elizabeth's literacy also raises the beguiling speculation that she may have heard of or even read some of the works of Christine de Pizan whom I introduced in Chapter 4. Christine's work was known in England in court circles by the late 1390s. She sent a collection of her poems to the earl of Salisbury, whom she's met in Paris, in 1398 or 1399 and her son spent three years in the earl's household. In 1401 Henry IV invited Christine to become resident poet at his court and Christine sent King Henry manuscripts of some of her work though she didn't intend to accept his invitation. At least one of her poems was translated into English by Thomas Hoccleve by 1402. With Elizabeth's husband, Richard, in regular attendance at the royal court in this period there seems at least a chance that word of Christine's writings reached Elizabeth and other literate women in the north in the early 1400s.

Now for evidence underpinning my suggestion that Elizabeth was independent-minded, 'her own woman'. Firstly, we know that Elizabeth waited five or six years after Brian Stapleton's death before remarrying although, as a wealthy woman, she must have had numerous suitors. Professor Joel Rosenthal's research shows that most widows of Elizabeth's status remarried within five years or remained widows for life so Elizabeth remaining single for a considerable time before choosing to remarry suggests she had confidence in her ability both to lead a satisfying single life and make her own decisions about marriage.

Another possible pointer to her independence of mind comes in an intriguing and puzzling reference to Elizabeth in the will of her father-in-law, Sir Brian Stapleton. Sir Brian says (in French):

> *I leave to Elizabeth Stapleton, my daughter, a silver gilt and enamel table showing the coronation of Our Lady, if she behaves towards me fully as she should, right up to the time of my death.*
>
> *And I also leave to Elizabeth a ribbon of purple silk which I wear round my neck with a cross of silver gilt and a medal with the image of Our Lady whether she behaves well or badly.*

Sir Brian's will is lengthy but this is the only bequest which makes a personal comment about a legatee. How do we interpret the phrase '*if she behaves towards me fully as she should*' and why is one bequest dependent on Elizabeth's good behaviour while the other is left to her regardless of her actions? Is this an affectionate reference to Elizabeth's independence of mind, a trait Sir Brian, a strong character himself, admired or did he feel that Elizabeth had been too much her own woman and insufficiently obedient to his wishes? Here I really am in the territory that Commissario Brunetti warned about – the danger of interpreting evidence to suit my instincts – but I can see exactly why Professor Carole Rawcliffe described Elizabeth as 'intelligent and interesting' in the History of Parliament biography of Elizabeth's son, Brian Stapleton.

I've spent quite a lot of time on Elizabeth, balancing out my discussion of Richard's horsemanship, military skills and chivalric ideals at the joust at Carlisle so I'll simply summarise here what else I can suggest about Richard's character. Meeting Richard at that tournament at Carlisle you could be forgiven for seeing him as predominantly a military figure, only at home in the saddle, at tournaments and on the battlefield – the medieval equivalent of a highly-skilled footballer who might struggle to adapt to the world beyond his sporting career. However that one-dimensional image of Richard does him an injustice. There are no explicit descriptions of his character but, making inferences from his long career in royal service (which I'll explore in future chapters) I see Richard as having 'determination, commitment and intelligence' and 'hard-working and highly respected', based on his continuing royal service for almost the whole of his long life. He was chosen to take part in diplomatic negotiations, carry out important responsibilities in Parliament (including as Speaker in 1415) and held numerous key roles in local administration in the north-west and in Yorkshire. He was a Knight of the Shire for the parliament in December 1421 when he was very nearly or had reached the age of 70. Little of this would have taken place – and certainly not well into his sixties – if successive kings and colleagues had not had great respect for his intelligence, effectiveness and loyalty and if he hadn't retained his fitness and health.

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This chapter has been something of a lucky dip into the evidence to develop my sense of Richard and Elizabeth as individuals – their characters, personalities and appearance. At this stage I can, cautiously, describe them as strong, distinctive personalities and people of determination, commitment and intelligence. They both seem to have taken pride in their appearance – as befitted and was expected of people of their status – and had a capacity for friendship. Richard was

extremely hard-working and highly-respected and Elizabeth appears to have been ‘her own woman’. That said, this is very much an initial hypothesis and there will be much more to learn about Richard and Elizabeth in the chapters to come – and not all of it will sound so positive.

I’ll end by returning to the evidence in Henry Vavasour’s will that gave me another of those cat-sitting moments when I can glimpse Richard and Elizabeth through another universal human quality – friendship. Thanks to Henry’s will, I can imagine a series of scenes – of Richard and Elizabeth dismounting at Hazelwood castle and being greeted by Henry and Margaret, of the four of them sitting and talking together, of Richard leaning on a fence as he and Henry discuss that grey horse he likes the look of – and, one day in the future, of the concern on Elizabeth’s face as she comforts Margaret after Henry’s death and her mixed feelings of sadness and pleasure as she tries on the gold ring that Henry had left her in his will.

Such moments may only exist in my imagination but they’re a reminder that at some point Richard and Elizabeth had become ‘a couple’ and, before that, they’d experienced the excitement of getting to know each other – and this in turn raises the questions I want to explore in the next chapter – ‘how did they meet?’ and ‘was their marriage built on affection?’

How do I know?

Notes on my sources and reading for Chapter 5

In addition to the biographies, Calendars of Patent Rolls and other sources listed for earlier chapters I found the following most helpful.

Detailed descriptions of the tomb chests and effigies at Harewood can be found in:

> Pauline Routh and Richard Knowles, *The Medieval Monuments of Harewood*, 1983.

More recent and detailed analysis of the nature of effigies can be found in these two books. Dr Capwell's book (along with the other volumes in his trilogy on armour and effigies) is one of the most fascinating books I've read on this period, changing my perception of effigies as evidence and containing a host of fascinating details.

> Tobias Capwell, *Armour of the English Knight 1400-1450,* 2005.
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> Brian and Moira Gittos, *Interpreting Medieval Effigies*, a study of effigies in Yorkshire dating from before 1400, 2019.

For an equally fascinating discussion of livery collars (yes, a whole book on livery collars!), there's

> Matthew J Ward, *The Livery Collar in Late Medieval England and Wales: Politics, Identity and Affinity*, 2016

I'm also grateful to Dr Ward for discussing Richard Redmayn's collar with me via email.

The wills referred to in this chapter were published in *Testamenta Eboracensia part 1, Surtees Society, 1836.* This is available online at:

> https://archive.org/details/testamentaeborac01york/mode/2up
>
> They are Henry Vavasour (p.361), Thomas Roos (p.251) and Brian Stapleton (p.198)

I am grateful to Professor Anne Curry for her advice on my translation from Brian Stapleton's will.

For Carole Rawcliffe's comments on Elizabeth Aldburgh see her biography of Elizabeth's son, Brian Stapleton, in *House of Commons 1386-1421* ed. J S Roskell et al, 4 vols, History of Parliament, 1992.

For the copy of the *Legenda Sanctorum* in the University of Leeds library see:

> https://explore.library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/372701

For the reading of the works of Christine De Pizan in England I consulted an unpublished PhD thesis: Sarah Wilma Watson, *Women, Reading, And Literary Culture: The Reception Of Christine De Pizan In Fifteenth-Century England*, (The University of Pennsylvania, 2018)