Henry

Virtuous Prince

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Extract

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1

David Starkey asserts the moral right to
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INTRODUCTION

Henry and I go back a long way.

My first and second undergraduate essays at Cambridge, written in late 1964, were on his grandmother, Lady Margaret Beaufort, and his second wife, Anne Boleyn. My doctoral dissertation, begun in 1967 and finally completed in 1973, grew directly out of that second essay and was an in-depth study of his privy chamber and its staff. This was the department of the royal household that provided both the king's body service and his personal political aides. It was thus rather like the modern Downing Street or White House staff, and included individuals just as silky and shamelessly self-serving as their present-day equivalents.

One of them, William Compton, has a bit part in this book.

He was Henry's groom of the stool and I have only to write the words to be carried back almost four decades to the Cambridge University Library tea-room circa 1970. It is about 3.30 p.m. and I have met up with my fellow members of Geoffrey Elton's research seminar. We are a noisy, gregarious, grub-loving group. I am eating home-made lemon-cake with a gooey icing and filling and bits of grated lemon rind

that occasionally get stuck between the teeth. I am also drinking lemon tea. And I am talking. And talking. About Henry and his groom of the stool.

'Did you know the groom was *act*-ually' – I overemphasize the first syllable as though I were already on TV – 'in charge of Henry's close-stool? What? Oh that's the royal loo. Yes. And that he certainly attended the king when he used it? How do you know, you say? Well, the groom says so. He even describes the contents – solid as well as liquid. He may very well have wiped the royal bottom …'

No wonder my dissertation became known as doctoral faeces (say it fast!).

Happy days. And even they were not the beginning. Instead, another Cambridge scene, this time from my undergraduate days. I am sitting in one of Geoffrey Elton's lectures and nodding off. Suddenly, I jolt awake. 'Henry VIII', Elton announces, 'is the only king whose shape you remember.' Then he turns to the blackboard behind him and draws a quick sketch. First, a trapezium for the body. Then two splayed lines for the legs. A pair of triangles form the arms. The head and neck are a single oblong, surmounted by an angled line for the hat.

Pause for laughter. Then, playing to the audience, Elton adds another, inverted triangle for the codpiece. More laughter and applause.

* * *

Elton was of course right. Holbein's portrait of Henry VIII, which he here reduced, brilliantly, to the bare essentials of its almost cubist geometry, *is* memorable. Almost too memorable indeed. For it not only eclipses other English monarchs, with the exception of Henry's daughter Elizabeth. It also obscures the other Henry.

The point is this: there are *two* Henrys, just as there are *two* Elizabeths, the one old, the other young. And they are very, very different. Especially in the case of Henry. Holbein's Henry is the king of his last dozen or so years, when he was – in Charles Dickens's glorious phrase – a spot of blood and grease on the history of England. This is the hulking tyrant, with a face like a Humpty Dumpty of nightmare, who broke with Rome and made himself supreme head of the church; who married six wives, of whom he divorced two and divorced *and* executed two others; who dissolved six hundred monasteries, demolished most of them and shattered the religious pieties and practices of a thousand years; who beheaded nobles and ministers, including those who had been his closest friends, castrated, disembowelled and quartered rebels and traitors, boiled poisoners and burned heretics.

This is also the king who reinvented England; presided over the remaking of English as a language and literature and began to turn the English Channel into the widest strip of water in the world. He carried the powers of the English monarchy to their peak. Yet he also left a *damnosa hereditas* to his successors which led, not very indirectly, to Charles I's execution one hundred and two years almost to the day after

Henry's own death, and on a scaffold in front of the palace that Henry had made the supreme seat of royal government and where he himself had died.

But this is not the Henry of this book. This book is about the other Henry: the young, handsome prince, slim, athletic, musical and learned as no English ruler had been for centuries. This Henry loved his mother and – most unusually for a boy at the time – was brought up with his sisters, with all that implies about the civilizing and softening impact of female company. He was conventionally pious: he prostrated himself before images, went on pilgrimages and showed himself profoundly respectful of the pope as head of the church. He proclaimed that 'I loved true where I did marry', and meant it. He determined to knit up the wounds of the Wars of the Roses and restore the dispossessed. He abominated his father's meanness, secrecy and corrosive mistrust. Instead he modelled himself on Henry V, the greatest and noblest of his predecessors. Or he would be a new Arthur with a court that put Camelot in the shade. At the least, he determined that his reign, which began when he was only seventeen years and ten months old, should be a fresh start.

And it was. Or at least it was believed to be. Lord Mountjoy, his *socius studiorum* ('companion of studies'), hailed his accession as the beginning of a new golden age. Thomas More, who had known Henry since the future king was eight years old, went further. Henry, he proclaimed in the verses

he wrote to celebrate the coronation, was a new messiah and his reign a second coming.

Mountjoy we can perhaps discount. But More was nobody's fool. If he saw these extraordinary qualities in Henry then they, or something like them, must have been there indeed.

But there is a double difficulty. The first is of image. For there is no decent representation of the young Henry. There are a few panel portraits, but they are journeymen's work and do not hold a candle to Holbein's blazing genius. And without an image it is difficult to turn the paeans of praise about the young Henry from a cold, idealized abstraction into a thing of warm flesh and blood.

Here I have tried to flesh out Henry through words – including as much as possible of Henry's own words and those of his contemporaries. Often these were in Latin. Once this presented no difficulty. Now it is an obstacle, not only to the reader but to many scholars as well. For my own part, I pretend to little Classical scholarship. Instead I have freely resorted to translations, where they exist, and to the help of translators where they do not. The result has been enlightening and some of the most original material in the book has come from newly translated Latin sources. I am particularly grateful to Justine Taylor for her help in this regard.

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The other problem is one of explanation and is more fundamental. For to talk of two Henrys is only a figure of speech. They were in fact the same person. Or at least they were the same man when old and young. But how to explain the spectacular change from one to the other?

Was the young Henry a sort of aberration? Was he 'really' what he was to be in old age? Or was it all down to changing circumstances?

It can be put rather differently. Should we read him backwards, from what he became? Or forwards, from what he was?

Really there should be no question which. Modern scholarship is resolute that events must be read forward. It recognizes that the actors at the time were not gifted with foresight and it is clear that historians must not impose their own knowledge of what was to come on contemporaries who were necessarily ignorant of it. To do so is teleology. And to do so persistently is the ultimate sin of Whiggishness.

And yet. The truth is that the old Henry – with the horror, the soap opera and the drama – is immediately fascinating in a way that the young Henry is not. The young Henry is too conventional, too much a man of his own time. Or indeed of the age before his own. If he had been successful, he would have been a triumphant late-medieval king, a Henry V *redivivus*; as he failed, which he largely did, he merely represents a sort of fag-end.

So historians are constantly hunting for signs of what was to come. For heterodoxy. For scepticism about the externals

of faith. For doubts about his first marriage. For high views of royal power and low ones of papal authority.

It is all, it seems to me, a wild-goose chase.

The Henry who swears unquestioningly the traditional coronation oath of an English king in 1509 is not the same as the man who revises it, line-by-line and word-by-word, twenty-odd years later. The man who went on pilgrimage – whether to Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk in 1511 to give thanks for the birth of his son or to Master John Shorne at North Marston in Buckingham in gratitude for his recovery from the sweating sickness in 1521 – is not the same as the king who demolishes Becket's shrine and every other place of pilgrimage in England in the 1530s. Nor is the man who would write the *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* in 1521 – with its forceful argument that papal power was historically rooted, necessary for the unity of the church and the ultimate guarantor of uniformity of faith – the same as the man who, less than a decade later, rejected each of those propositions in turn to substitute his own kingly authority over the church for that of the pope.

In short, Henry's reformation – the king's reformation as it has recently and rightly been called – begins in 1527, and not in 1509 or 1515. True, in the latter year Henry (who liked rolling phrases) delivers himself of a ringing declaration: 'By the ordinance and sufferance of God, we are king of England, and kings of England in time past have never had any superior but God only.'

Ringing indeed. But Henry is saying no more than the most pious of his medieval ancestors, though he may be saying it rather better. For in 1515 the 'imperial' authority of the English crown meant only that it had no temporal superior; it did *not* mean that it was superior to the spiritual power of the church. This of course is what Henry – the ageing Henry – made it mean in the 1530s. But the latter proposition is not 'implicit' in the former. Nor is it 'latent', 'prefigured' or whatever other Whiggish weasel-words historians choose to use to mask their teleology.

On the contrary, far from being 'implicit', it took a revolution – and one made in blood – to achieve it.

But things have an end as well as a beginning. And it is equally clear that the Wars of the Roses ended with Henry's accession in 1509. They had not ended with his father's victory at Bosworth in 1485. Or with his parents' marriage the following year. Or with Lincoln's defeat at Stoke in 1487. Or with the crushing of the Cornish rebels in 1497 and the subsequent capture of Perkin Warbeck. They had not even ended with the surrender of Suffolk, the last pretender, to Henry VII in 1506.

But they did end when Henry came to the throne. And that they did so was personally and directly due to him. His own conjoined descent from York as well Lancaster was important. But so too were his decisions – which had been conditioned by his repeated youthful experiences of pretenders and plots and destructive insecurities – to let bygones be bygones, to knit up old wounds and to restore the

surviving members of the house of York (always excepting the inveterate traitor Suffolk and his siblings) to their wealth and dignities.

And, what has been insufficiently appreciated, it worked. The spectre of dynastic conflict, which had stalked England for the last fifty years, is suddenly laid. And it does not walk again. There are later dynastic problems of course. But they are not about York and Lancaster. They are about religion. Some of the Yorkists that the young Henry had restored *are* involved. But not as Yorkists. Instead, they rebel – or rather dream of rebelling – against him because they disagree with his religious policies.

Between these ends and beginnings, Henry's is a life which naturally falls in halves. Hence my decision to write it in two volumes. This first volume is intended to establish the authenticity and integrity of the young Henry; the second will be to show what he became and why.

Throughout the subject and focus is Henry – not his wives, his ministers, his courtiers or his children. All of course appear. And I have written at length about most of them elsewhere. Here, however, they only figure in so far as they help to explain Henry. And the same goes for everything else. I have drawn on an enormous variety of sources, from music and poetry to theology, architecture and marine engineering. But there are no separate studies of these subjects. They are there – as indeed are the politics, the diplomacy, the finance and the administration – only because they illuminate Henry.

This is, after all, a biography; it is not a life and times or, still less, a history of the reign.

I have incurred many debts in writing and researching this book: to my old friend Margaret Condon for allowing me to use her unpublished 'Itinerary' of Henry VII; to Sean Cunningham and Adrian Ailes of The National Archives for checking references and documents; to Adrian Ailes for his further help with heraldry; to Andrea Clarke of the British Library for checking documents and references there and for translating Spanish; to Steven Gunn of Merton College, Oxford for blazing a trail through the obscure last years of Henry VII which the rest of us gratefully follow; to the staff of the London Library who have made it possible for me to write this book here in Kent; to my editor, Arabella Pike and my agent, Peter Robinson for their encouragement, criticism and support, and, above all, to my partner, James Brown, who as usual has read and commented on each chapter as it was written and – not least – put up with me while I was writing them.

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1

ENTRY INTO THE WORLD

Henry, son of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, was born on 28 June 1491 at Greenwich, the royal manor on the south bank of the Thames some five miles to the east of London. He was their third child and second son, and he was christened in the adjacent church of the Friars Observant by Richard Foxe, then bishop of Exeter, lord privy seal and one of his father's leading ministers.[1]

These bare facts are all that has been known hitherto about Henry's birth. But somehow they have never seemed quite enough. Fortunately, another piece of evidence has turned up which makes clear that Henry was christened with all the pompous ritual laid down in the handbook of court protocol, known as *The Ryalle Book*.[2]

How really could it have been otherwise?

The christening, like most of the ceremonies of the Tudor court, combined the sacred with the secular. And each reinforced the theatricality of the other. First a stage was built, consisting of a tall circular wooden platform with tiers of steps and a central iron post. The assisting clergy stood on the lower steps, leaving the upper step and the reinforced top, with the massive silver font in its centre, free for the stars of the show: Bishop Foxe and Henry.

And heaven help any officious priest or deacon who spoiled the view!

Next, the Tudors' love of rich, many-textured fabrics came into play. These were the principal source of decoration in a court that was always on the move: they could transform a bare and empty chamber in a long unlived-in palace in an hour or two; they could also turn, equally briskly, the plain box of the Friars' church into a setting worthy of the prince that Henry was to be. In charge of these fabrics were the specialist staffs of the royal wardrobes, who now took over.

Benjamin Digby, yeoman of the queen's wardrobe of the beds, and his men covered the wood and iron of the platform with gaily coloured cloth; hung a fringed and embroidered cloth-of-gold canopy over the font from 'line' or cords; lined and wrapped the font with fine linen or 'lawn' and trimmed its edge with a sheer, almost translucent stuff known as 'Cypress' from its original place of manufacture. Finally,

other household officers clad the walls of the church with cloth-of-gold and tapestries and laid rich carpets on the floor.[3]

The stagery complete, the performance could begin. Henry was undressed in the 'traverse' or tent-like green room, where more Cypress had been used to cover and draught-proof the adjacent windows. Then Foxe gave him his name and plunged him bodily three times into the waters of the font. Even this had been stage-managed, as the water had been gently warmed beforehand so as not to shock Henry and make him spoil the show by crying.

A new Christian had entered the world, and a new royal prince was ready to take his place in the firmament. Trumpets sounded, the attendants lit their torches, the heralds put on their gold-embroidered tabards and Henry, wrapped in a mantle of cloth-of-gold furred with ermine and clutching a decorated and lighted candle in his hands, was carried in triumph in a burst of light and sound.

Henry had come into the world on a stage; he would live on one and die on one.

Not, it must be admitted, that anybody at the time took much notice.

No chronicler, herald or contemporary historian gave the event more than a passing – and usually retrospective – mention. None of his father's poets laureate was inspired to commemorative verse. Even his grandmother, Lady Margaret Beaufort, only noted the bare details of his birth in

the calendar of the book of hours which she used as a sort of family chronicle.[4]

How did it come to pass that the Tudor who would make most noise in the world should enter it so quietly and almost unobserved? Partly it was a matter of accident: Henry happened to be born at the wrong time and in the wrong place. It was high summer, and most people who mattered were about to leave stinking, plague-ridden London for the country delights of the Long Vacation. Nor did Greenwich help. Still officially known as *Placentia* or 'Pleasure' in medieval Latin, it was a semi-private riverside retreat, more the queen's than the king's and emphatically off the beaten track.

Nevertheless, intention came into it as well. That Greenwich was used for Elizabeth of York's confinement in the first place suggests that a decision had already been taken to downplay the event. For Henry was the wrong baby to attract attention anyway. In the fullness of time he would be a royal star, effortlessly drawing all eyes and becoming the prime mover of the political cosmos and the axis round which English history turns. Then, he was only the spare and not the heir.

And the spare did not matter – or, at least, did not matter very much.

But there is a paradox, as there will be so often in Henry's story. What made Henry relatively unimportant to others,

including his own parents, was supremely important to him. For his status as second son was to condition almost everything about his first dozen years: his upbringing, his education, his relationship with his parents and his siblings, his attitude to women, even where he was brought up.

In short, in so far as the Henry we know was a product of nurture rather than nature, that nurture was determined by his also-ran place in the family pecking order.

On the other hand, of course, all this matters – to us and indeed to Henry – only because in circumstances unimaginable, or at least unimagined, at the time of his birth, Henry was to become the eldest surviving son.

And that changed everything – for England as well as for Henry.