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Opening Extract from...

Henry IV

Written by Chris Given-Wilson

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INTRODUCTION

On 20 March 1413, the feast of St Cuthbert, King Henry IV of England lay dying in the Jerusalem chamber at Westminster abbey. On a couch beside him was his crown, around him several attendants. Presently his breathing grew so shallow that it was presumed he had died, so a sheet was drawn over his face and the prince of Wales sent for. Believing himself now to be king, the prince gathered up the crown and left the room, but scarcely had he done so when a sigh was heard from under the sheet, and when they drew it back the attendants realized their mistake. Looking about him, the king asked what had become of his crown. ‘The prince your son has taken it away,’ they replied. They were sent to summon him, and when the prince reappeared Henry asked him to explain himself. ‘My lord,’ he said, ‘these people assured me that you were dead, and since I am your eldest son and it is to me that your crown and your kingdom will descend after your death, I took it away’. ‘And how, my son,’ asked the king, ‘do you have any right to it, for as you well know, I never had any?’ ‘You held it with your sword, my lord, and for as long as I live I shall do the same,’ answered the prince. ‘Very well then,’ replied the king, ‘The rest I leave to God, and I pray Him to have mercy on me.’ These were Henry IV’s last words. The prince now became King Henry V, and no man gainsaid his right to the kingdom.¹

Many tales were told of Henry IV’s deathbed, most of them, like this one, by people who were not there but who saw it as an opportunity for political point-scoring. Yet the fact that this fable was too good to be true did little to discourage its circulation. Invented or perhaps retailed a quarter of a century after the event by the Burgundian chronicler Enguerrand de Monstrelet, it eventually found its way back to England and was taken up in the sixteenth century by Edward Hall and Raphael Holinshed, through whom it reached Shakespeare and achieved immortality. It was, after all,

¹ *La Chronique d’Enguerran de Monstrelet 1400–1444*, ed. L. Douët-d’Arcq (SHF, 6 vols, Paris, 1858), ii.338–9.

a good story, and it fitted Shakespeare's image of the king, for it reflected an enduring moral truth of Henry's reign, namely that it was his usurpation of the throne that defined his kingship. Neither at home nor abroad would enemies and detractors permit him to escape from the shadow of 1399. A sense of the displacement of authority rattles around like a pinball in contemporary literature. On the other hand, it does not validate Shakespeare's characterization of the king. The haunted, care-worn, at times almost irrelevant monarch of *Henry IV Parts I and II* bears little resemblance to the man who ruled England between 1399 and 1413, although the tactical 'Bullingbrook' of *Richard II* comes closer to the mark. Peerless poet and dramatist that he was, historically Shakespeare has nothing to contribute to an understanding of Henry or his reign, although his influence on later perceptions of the king was immense.²

Better guides are the contemporary chroniclers who, whether or not they liked the king, whether or not they accepted his right to rule, feared and respected his power. Thomas Walsingham, the St Albans monk who wrote the fullest and most informative account of the reign, said that Henry 'reigned gloriously for thirteen-and-a-half years'. Adam Usk praised his 'powerful rule, during which he crushed all those who rebelled against him'. An anonymous chronicler claimed that, despite constantly extorting taxes, Henry was greatly loved by his people, but this was wishful thinking. Most would have agreed with John Strecche, chronicler of Kenilworth priory, who extolled the king's military prowess, but admitted that by breaking his promises he lost the people's trust; nevertheless, he concluded, 'few were his equal, many were his followers, and never was he defeated in battle'. Even Monstrelet, no friend to the Lancastrian dynasty, called him 'a valiant knight, fierce and cunning towards his enemies'.³ It is difficult to think that they were all wrong.

Compared to the abundance of narratives for the reigns of Richard II and Henry V, that of Henry IV was not well served by the chroniclers. Only the first three years of his reign received comparable coverage, and only Walsingham came close to attempting a consecutive record of its events, although even his (or his assistants') enthusiasm for the task waned as the reign progressed.⁴ On the other hand, the fact that those chroniclers

² Below (Epilogue), pp. 535–41.

³ *SAC II*, 618–19; *Usk*, 242–3; BL Add. Ms 35,295, fo. 262r; C. Kingsford, *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford, 1913), 277; *Monstrelet*, ii.337.

⁴ J. Clark, 'Thomas Walsingham Reconsidered: Books and Learning at Late Medieval St Albans', *Speculum* 77 (2002), 832–60, questions Walsingham's authorship of the whole of the St Albans chronicle.

who saw the reign through from beginning to end, however cursorily, wrote independently of each other, means that they provide complementary information and contrasting points of view. Usk, Strecche, 'Giles' and the Franciscan author of the *Continuatio Eulogii* were not expansive chroniclers, but they were individualistic, opinionated and contemporary. It was not until after the king's death – and more busily after the implosion of Lancastrian kingship in the mid-fifteenth century – that the memory industry set about ironing out the creases to produce the enduring image of the 'unquiet times' of Henry IV.⁵

Yet still Henry remains the most neglected of England's late medieval monarchs. There is, naturally, a contested historiography underlying the opinions expressed in this book, which is discussed further in the Epilogue, but a good number of historians, dazzled by the brilliance of Henry V and the showy self-destruction of Richard II, have allowed their eyes to slip rather hurriedly past the reign that bridged them, viewing Henry IV more as a means (to Richard's overthrow, to Henry V's heroics) than as an end in himself. Much the fullest account of the reign is J. H. Wylie's omnivorous four-volume *History of England under Henry the Fourth*, published between 1884 and 1898, but, despite the remarkable amount of information assembled by Wylie, it is, as its title suggests, a history of early fifteenth-century England rather than a biography of the king. Of modern biographies of Henry, the most balanced is by J. L. Kirby (*Henry IV of England*, 1970), the most readable by I. Mortimer (*The Fears of Henry IV*, 2007), though neither deals adequately with the years after 1406. This imbalance is characteristic of the historiography of the reign almost from the start. Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part II* moves directly from 1405 to 1413, and it was largely through analysis of the parliaments of 1399 to 1406 that Stubbs formulated the thesis that Henry was a constitutional monarch.⁶ A rough calculation indicates that the twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature on the years 1399 to 1406 exceeds that on the years 1407 to 1413 by a factor of five or six. It is not hard to see why: the risings of 1400, 1403 and 1405, the Welsh rebellion, French and Scottish hostility and the difficult parliaments of 1401 to 1406 were the crucible of Lancastrian kingship. Moreover, key sources dry up after 1406: 70 per cent of the surviving acts of the Privy Council, three-quarters of Henry's diplomatic correspondence and 85 per cent of his known signet letters belong to the years 1399–1406; six

⁵The phrase was coined by Edward Hall, *The Union of the two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York* (1542).

⁶Below (Epilogue), pp. 538–9.

parliaments were documented during this period, three between 1407 and 1413. Yet there was no slackening in the work of the main departments of state – chancery, exchequer, law courts. Henry's personal involvement may have declined along with his health, but government did not, and in fact the second half of the reign was a time when, secure in the possession of the throne, the king and his ministers could begin to devise the policy initiatives denied them by the relentless pressure of the early years.

This book is a political biography, not a history of England in the early fifteenth century, but some background to the events it describes will be helpful. England in 1400 was a land of around two-and-a-half million people. Sixty years earlier the population had been at least double that, perhaps even six or seven million, but the Black Death of 1348–50 had halved it and recurrent visitations of the plague blunted recovery. In a society in which 80 per cent or more of people worked the land for a living, this demographic catastrophe led to economic and social adjustment: a surplus of labour became a shortage; more land became available to enterprising peasants; rents, prices and serfdom declined; wages rose. Landlords, eager to maintain their incomes, reacted with repressive measures, including labour legislation, but coercion and expectation collided explosively in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Although quickly suppressed, the revolt left the government and landlords wary of pursuing policies that might lead to another uprising.

The pervasive sense of dislocation induced by plague and social unrest was heightened by military failure and religious divisions. The triumphs of Edward III and his son, the Black Prince, during the early decades of the Hundred Years War were becoming a distant, if cherished, memory. Much of what England had won by the Treaty of Brétigny in 1360 was lost in the 1370s, a decade which also saw the beginning of the Great Schism (1378–1417), during which rival popes based at Rome and Avignon divided Europe into opposing camps. It was also in the 1370s that Lollardy, the first serious outbreak of heresy in England for a millennium, began to trouble the authorities, as it would continue to do for the next four decades and intermittently thereafter.

The fact that policies for the management of the labour force, the conduct of the war, the healing of the Schism and the suppression of heresy all came to be seen as the responsibility of royal government reflected the centralized nature of the English polity by comparison with much of Europe. The chancery and exchequer were now settled at Westminster, employing hundreds of clerks who each year despatched thirty or forty

thousand letters in the king's name to all parts of the kingdom.⁷ Local administration operated differently, staffed not by graded career officials of the crown but by local men – knights, esquires, gentlemen, merchants – who served limited terms or were appointed to undertake specific tasks such as collecting a subsidy or arraying soldiers for war. Sheriffs, coroners and escheators had for long been the principal royal agents in the shires, but as the demands of the crown increased so did the number of functionaries needed to enforce them, from Justices of the Peace to commissioners of array, customs officers and tax-collectors. Taxation, a *sine qua non* of solvent government by 1400, was deeply disliked and at times violently resisted, but had become familiar enough to most Englishmen to be regularly and efficiently collected. Royal justice by now enjoyed a virtual monopoly of major civil and criminal cases throughout the realm, though not of ecclesiastical or lesser ones. Around three thousand new suits a year were brought to the central law courts, while legislation regulated not just crime and possessory actions but also, increasingly, matters such as work, vagrancy, dress, leisure, and religious and educational practice. Cities and boroughs, of which there were over 600 in the kingdom, had greater licence to regulate their internal affairs, but with the qualified exception of London they lacked the autonomy or political influence of large towns in northern Italy, Flanders, southern France or parts of Germany. Nor were English towns wont to league together in order to achieve their aims, a familiar tactic elsewhere.⁸

Royal government, in short, was not something that Englishmen could ignore, wherever they lived and however great they were. England was not a polity in which kings could rule only by allowing great feudatories a virtually free hand in their own lordships, as was the case in some parts of Europe. One reason for this was because English nobles lacked the large and consolidated blocks of land which made a duke of Brittany or Saxony, for example, the lord of all men within the confines of his duchy and hence, potentially, an alternative rather than an intermediate source of authority to that of the king or emperor. Most English nobles held estates scattered throughout a number of counties, sometimes bearing little relation to the titles they bore.

England's administrative precocity also meant that, generally speaking, men of all sorts and conditions within the English kingdom tended to find that the best way to augment their power was in tandem with the crown,

⁷ A. Brown, *The Governance of Late Medieval England 1272–1461* (London, 1989), 52.

⁸ The Hanseatic and Lombard leagues and the Swiss confederation are the most striking examples; leagues of towns were especially effective in the Empire.

its institutions, and its vast fund of patronage, rather than to set themselves up as rivals to it. This is one reason why, despite dynastic strife, the public authority of the crown expanded so markedly during the later Middle Ages, though it also meant that this was not a public authority simply imposed from above, but exercised in cooperation with the many thousands of landholders and others who, in a myriad of different ways, acted as the crown's agents in the localities. The growth of the crown's authority did not therefore involve a diminution of the authority of lesser polities. The power of noble lordship, the economic and to some extent political influence of merchant elites in the towns, and the control by the gentry of affairs in their localities all increased during the fourteenth century.⁹ The raising of contract armies to fight abroad, for example, augmented the military power of the nobility as well as of the crown; the development of the office of Justice of the Peace enhanced the judicial power of crown, lords and gentry simultaneously. If, as is sometimes claimed, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed the rise of the state in England (and indeed Europe), it rose through interaction and participation as much as through the stiffening of monarchical institutions, a process of widening cooperation and continuous adjustment punctuated by violent struggle, often for personal or dynastic advancement. That additional (typically financial) impositions by the crown should invite closer scrutiny and provide extra fuel for conflict is hardly surprising. Widening participation in government was bound to throw up more occasions for disagreement, but the only true 'enemies of the state' in late medieval England (as opposed to rebels or adversaries of the king) were hostile foreigners, radical heretics and, when they refused to accept their allotted place in society, as in 1381, the lower orders. Faced with such threats, the establishment closed ranks and entrenched its power.

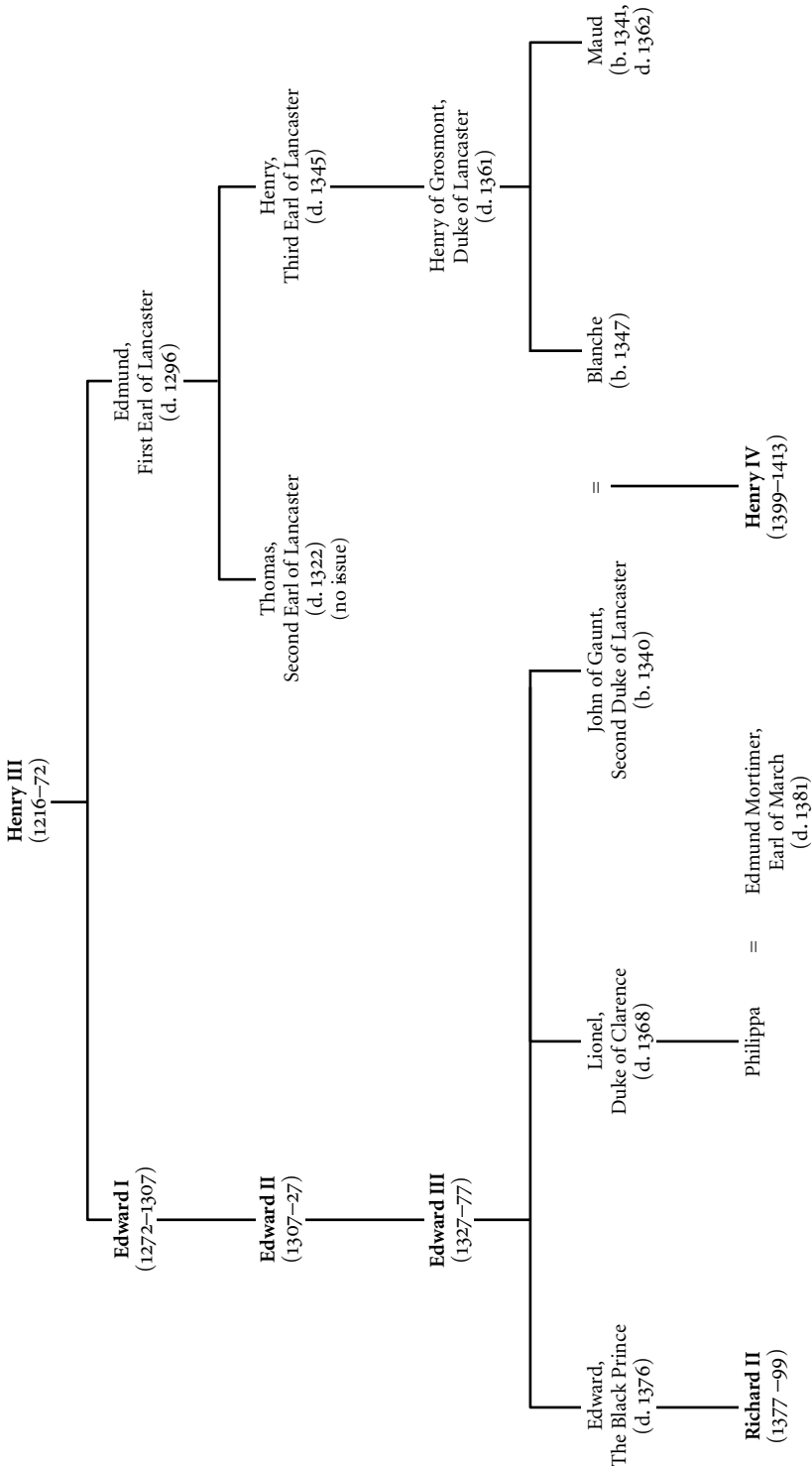
Widening participation in government is reflected in the ever-expanding role of parliament. Parliament was not an administrative department of the crown, since parliaments were in session only for five or six weeks of the year on average, but it was by now the clearing-house for the great business of the realm, a roughly annual national health check, the outcome of which was not easy to predict. There was always a fair amount of

⁹ See, for example, R. Davies, *Lords and Lordship in the British Isles*, *passim*; C. Given-Wilson, 'The King and the Gentry in Fourteenth-Century England', *TRHS* 37 (1987), 87–102. For an analysis of this theme in a Europe-wide context, see J. Watts, *The Making of Politics: Europe 1300–1500* (Cambridge, 2009); for England, see G. Harriss, 'Political Society and the Growth of Government in Late Medieval England', *Past and Present* 138 (1993), 28–57, and G. Harriss, *Shaping the Nation: England 1360–1461* (Oxford, 2005).

criticism, sometimes a great deal, and occasionally parliaments became the stage for bitter infighting, but ideally, and in practice not infrequently, the relationship between king and parliament functioned as a mutually supportive partnership. So too (ideally) did the relationship between the king and the Church, although this was becoming a less equal partnership. The papacy's move to Avignon in 1309, a cause of deep suspicion to a nation engaged in a prolonged struggle with the French, had spawned a more robust attitude to claims of papal sovereignty over Englishmen, leading to increased control by the king and nobility of the large reserves of patronage, from bishoprics downwards, at the Church's disposal. By and large the spiritual jurisdiction of the Catholic Church remained intact, but deep inroads had been carved into what were still nominally its resources. The eventual outcome of this process – the assumption by Henry VIII of supremacy over the *Ecclesia Anglicana* – was far from certain at this stage, but the building blocks were being put in place.

Nowhere did the aspiration of fifteenth-century rulers to act as 'emperors in their own kingdoms' come closer to being realized than in England. This was a functioning state, a vehicle for powerful, potentially predatory, kingship. On the other hand, its dependence on active and cooperative kingship and the power which it invested in the person of the monarch was also its Achilles heel, for it relied disproportionately on the aptitude of each king to make it function in a way that was acceptable to the polity, and aptitude was not something that the lottery of heredity could guarantee.

Table 1 The House of Lancaster and the Crown, 1272–1399 (selective)



Part One

THE GREAT DUCHY
1267–1399

Table 2 Descendants of John of Gaunt (selective)

