

Establishing the Henrician Regime, 1485–1525

On August 22, 1485 rebel forces led by Henry Tudor, earl of Richmond (1457–1509), defeated a royal army under King Richard III (1452–85; reigned 1483–5) at the battle of Bosworth Field, Leicestershire (see map 4). As all students of Shakespeare know, Richard was killed. His crown, said to have rolled under a hawthorn bush, was retrieved and offered to his opponent, who wasted no time in proclaiming himself King Henry VII. According to tradition, these dramatic events ended decades of political instability and established the Tudor dynasty, which would rule England effectively for over a century.

As told in Shakespeare's *Tragedy of King Richard III*, Henry's victory and the rise of the Tudors has an air of inevitability. But Shakespeare wrote a century after these events, during the reign of Henry's granddaughter, Queen Elizabeth (1533–1603; reigned 1558–1603). Naturally, his hindsight was 20/20 and calculated to flatter the ruling house under which he lived. No one alive in 1485, not even Henry, could have felt so certain about his family's prospects. During the previous hundred years three different royal houses had ruled England. Each had claimed a disputed succession and each had fallen with the murder of its king and head. Each line had descendants still living in 1485, some of whom had better claims to the throne than Henry did. Recent history suggested that each of these rival claimants would find support among the nobility, so why should anyone bet on the Tudors? In short, there was little reason to think that the bloodshed and turbulence were over.

And yet, though he would face many challenges, Henry VII would not be overthrown. Instead, he would rule England for nearly 25 years and die in his bed, safe in the knowledge that his son, also named Henry, would succeed to a more or less united, loyal, and peaceful realm supported by a full treasury. The story of how Henry VII met these challenges and established his dynasty will be told in this chapter. But first, in order to understand the magnitude of the task and its accomplishment, it is necessary to review briefly the dynastic crisis known, romantically but inaccurately, as the Wars of the Roses.¹



Map 4 *The Wars of the Roses, 1455–85.*

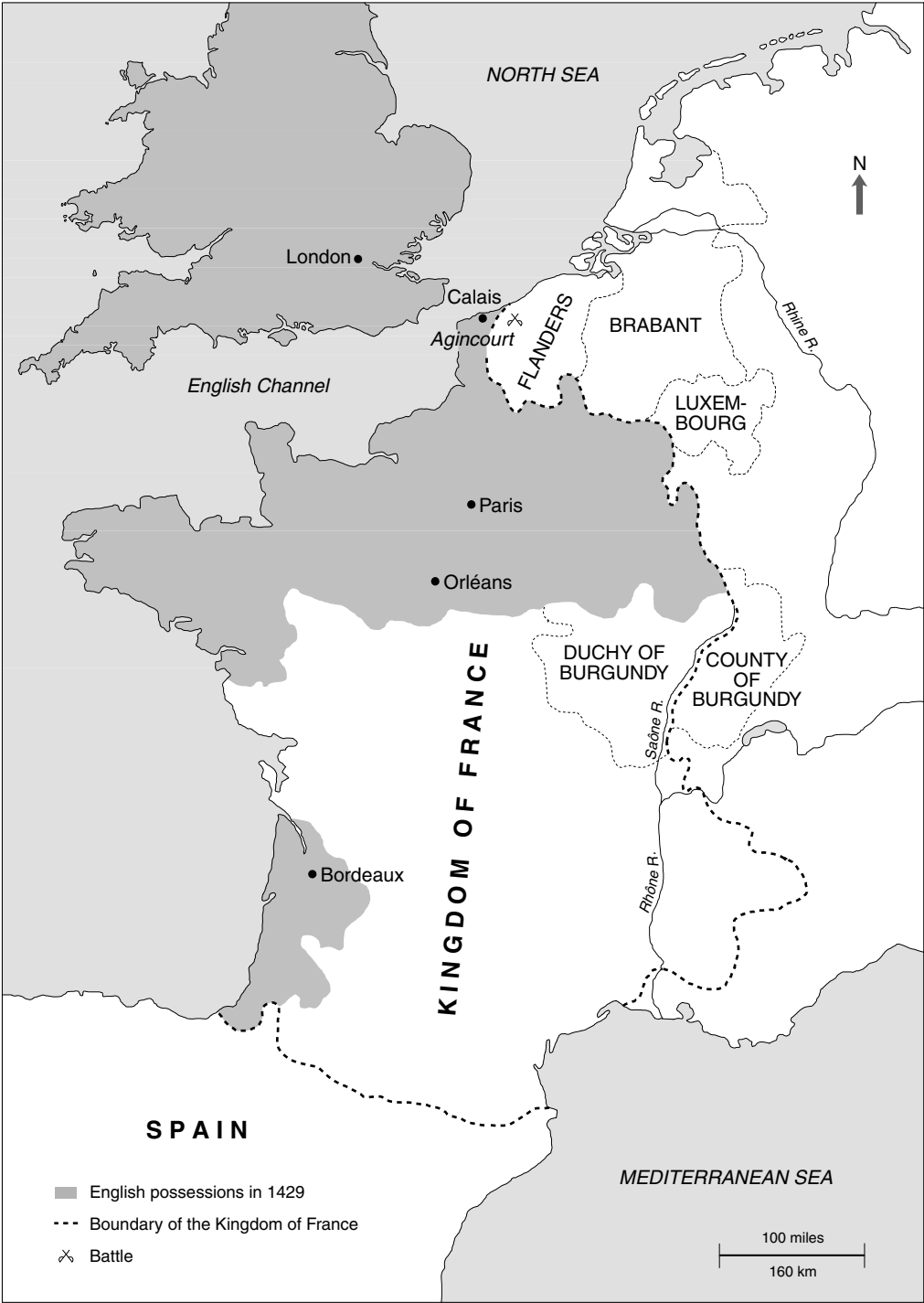
The Wars of the Roses, 1455–85

It might be argued that all of the trouble began over a century earlier because of a simple biological fact: King Edward III (1312–77; reigned 1327–77) had six sons (see genealogy 1, p. 429). Royal heirs were normally a cause for celebration in medieval England, but so many heirs implied an army of grandchildren and later descendants – each of whom would possess royal blood and, therefore, a claim to the throne. Still, this might not have mattered if two of those grandchildren, an earlier Richard and an earlier Henry, had not clashed over royal policy. Dominated by his royal uncles as a child, King Richard II (1367–1400; reigned 1377–99) had a stormy relationship with the nobility, especially his uncles' children, as an adult. The most prominent critic was Henry Bolingbroke, duke of Lancaster (1366–1413), son of the John of Gaunt (1340–99) whom we met in the Introduction (see genealogy 1). In 1399 Richard confiscated Lancaster's ancestral lands. Lancaster, aided by a number of other disgruntled noble families, rebelled against his cousin and anointed king, deposed him, and assumed the Crown as King Henry IV (1399–1413). In so doing, he established the Lancastrian dynasty on the English throne – but broke the Great Chain of Being. Looking back with hindsight, Shakespeare and many of his contemporaries thought that this was the moment that set England on the course – or curse – of political instability. In *The Tragedy of King Richard II*, he has the bishop of Carlisle predict the consequences of Henry Bolingbroke's usurpation as follows:

And if you crown him, let me prophesy,
The blood of English shall manure the ground,
And future ages groan for this foul act ...;
O if you raise this house against this house,
It will the woofullest division prove
That ever fell upon this cursed earth.
Prevent it, resist it, let it not be so,
Lest child, child's children, cry against you – woe! (*Richard II* 4.1)

Shakespeare, writing long after these events, knew that the prediction would come true. The speech is therefore not so much an accurate exposition of contemporary opinion at the time of Richard's overthrow as it is a reflection of how English men and women came to feel about that event under the Tudors.

But many modern historians would point out that, despite his dubious rise to the top, Henry IV was a remarkably successful king. He established himself and his line, suppressing nearly all opposition by the middle of his reign. His son, Henry V (1386/7–1422; reigned 1413–22), did even better. He fulfilled contemporary expectations of kingship, revived the glories of Edward III's reign, and distracted his barons away from any doubts they might have had about his legitimacy by renewing a longstanding conflict with France known as the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453). After winning a stunning victory over a much larger French force at Agincourt in 1415 (see map 5), Henry was recognized by the



Map 5 Southern England and western France during the later Middle Ages.

French king, Charles VI (1368–1422; reigned 1380–1422) as the heir to the French throne as well. This, despite the fact that Charles had a son, also named Charles (1403–61). In fact, central and southern France remained loyal to the *dauphin* (the French crown prince), provoking Henry into another campaign in 1421–2. It was on his way to besiege a recalcitrant French city, that Henry V contracted dysentery and died.

The untimely death of Henry V was, for many historians, the real starting point for the disasters to come, for, combined with the almost simultaneous demise of Charles VI, it brought to the English and French thrones an infant of just nine months: Henry VI (1421–71; reigned 1422–61, 1470–1). Given his youth, it was inevitable that the early years of the new king's reign would be dominated by the nobility, in particular his many royal relatives. But even after being declared of age in 1437, he proved to be a meek, pious, well-intentioned but weak-minded nonentity. Eventually, he went insane. Even before he did so, he was dominated by family and courtiers, in particular his great-uncles of the Beaufort family, dukes of Somerset; and from 1444 his wife, Margaret of Anjou (1430–82). They became notorious for aggrandizing power and wealth, for running a corrupt and incompetent administration, and for losing France. In 1436, Paris fell back into French hands. By 1450 the French had driven the English out of Normandy. By 1453, what had once been an English continental empire had been reduced to the solitary Channel port of Calais (map 5). The French had won the Hundred Years' War. The loser was to be Henry VI and the house of Lancaster.

Put another way, the end of the Hundred Years' War is important in French history because it produced a unified France under a single acknowledged native king. It is important in English history because it destabilized the English monarchy and economy, discredited the house of Lancaster, and divided the English nobility. The result was the Wars of the Roses. Remember that the Lancastrians had come to the Crown not through lawful descent, but through force of arms. Now their military skills had proved inadequate. Moreover, the wars against France had been very expensive and ruinous to trade. In 1450 the Crown's debts stood at £372,000; its income but £36,000 a year, a steep decline from an annual revenue of £120,000 under Richard II. The House of Commons refused to increase taxes, knowing that they would go either to a losing war effort or to line Beaufort pockets. Since royal revenue was not keeping up with expenditure, the king could only pay for military affairs by borrowing large sums at exorbitant rates of interest. Worse, in the spring of 1450 a popular rebellion, led by an obscure figure named Jack Cade (d. 1450), broke out in the southeast. The rebels justified their actions with a sweeping indictment of Henry VI's reign: "[His] law is lost, his merchandise is lost; his commons are destroyed. The sea is lost; France is lost; himself is made so poor that he may not pay for his meat or drink; he oweth more and [is] greater in debt than ever was King in England."² Cade was killed and his rebellion suppressed with some difficulty, but the problems of royal control, finance, and foreign policy would overwhelm the Lancastrian regime.

Given an incompetent king, a corrupt and inefficient government, a failed war effort, a wrecked economy, and a rebellious populace, it was inevitable that the

nobility would begin to question Lancastrian rule. The most prominent of these critics was Richard, duke of York (1411–60). York was a direct descendant of Edward III through both his mother and his father (see genealogy 1). Thus, he could make nearly as good a claim to the throne as its present, Lancastrian, occupant. Moreover, the duke of York was the greatest landowner in England, which provided him with immense wealth and made him head of the largest affinity in the realm. Finally, he was allied by marriage to the powerful Neville family. None of this is to say that York started out with a plan to seize the throne. Rather, he began the reign as a loyal servant of the Crown who, like many nobles, began to feel himself frozen out of royal favor by the Beauforts. When, in the 1450s, Henry VI began to decline into madness, the court into corruption, and the country into economic depression, York and his followers began to challenge Queen Margaret and Edmund Beaufort, duke of Somerset (ca. 1406–55) for office and influence, eventually forcing York's appointment as protector of the realm in 1454. The struggle turned violent in 1455 when the duke of York and the Nevilles raised their affinities, and defeated and killed Somerset at the battle of St. Albans, Hertfordshire (see map 4). After St. Albans, York was reinstated as lord protector, but the Beaufort faction was by no means finished. Both sides bided their time, maneuvered for advantage, and prepared for further hostilities: the Wars of the Roses had begun.

Fighting resumed in the autumn of 1459, and lasted for two years. At first, the Lancastrians had the upper hand, winning the battle of Ludford Bridge, Shropshire, in October (map 4). They followed up on their victory by attainting and so ruining a number of Yorkist peers. But in June of 1460 Richard Neville, earl of Warwick (1428–71), the commander of the Calais garrison, returned to England and helped turn the tide against the Lancastrians. The next month, the Yorkists defeated the king's forces at Northampton, and Richard, duke of York formally laid claim to the Crown. However, in December, Richard's army was defeated at Wakefield, Yorkshire (map 4), and he was killed. His son, Edward (1442–83), now became duke of York. At this point the Lancastrians had the advantage again, and Queen Margaret marched on London. But the city, perhaps angry at the state of trade, and certainly alarmed at stories of the rapacity of her army, closed its gates to her. Rather, on March 4, 1461, the citizens of London and members of the nobility acclaimed the new duke of York as King Edward IV. That claim was finally made good at the end of the month in a seven-hour mêlée during a blinding snowstorm at Towton Moor, Yorkshire (map 4). At the end of it, the Lancastrian army lay defeated and Edward returned to London in triumph. The reign of King Edward IV (1461–83) had begun.

The Yorkists won not because Edward's claim to the throne was stronger than Henry's, but because Henry was a weak and unsuccessful king. The country's leading citizens were sick of defeat abroad, expensive and corrupt government at home, and the vindictiveness of Lancastrian measures against the Yorkists. Nevertheless, King Edward faced massive obstacles if he was to rehabilitate English monarchy. First, Lancastrian incompetence, cruelty, and greed had besmirched not only that line's reputation, but the very office of sovereign itself.

Moreover, by losing the French lands, driving the Crown into debt, and using Parliament to pursue political vendettas, they had weakened the monarchy constitutionally. Worse, the confusion of the previous decade over rival claims to the throne had also weakened the principle of hereditary succession. Finally, it should be remembered that the Yorkists had profited from the fact that for over a decade great noble affinities had made war on the king and on each other with near impunity. It might not be so easy to get them out of the habit. Some peers, such as Warwick (who was being called “kingmaker”), were bound to feel that the new king owed them much more than lands and favor.

Fortunately for the new regime, Edward IV was, on balance, a good choice to restore the prestige of monarchy and to establish the new line. Unlike Henry VI, who was often criticized for his shabby appearance, Edward had a commanding presence: tall, handsome, approachable, stylish in his dress. These qualities may seem superficial, but they should not be underestimated. The first requirement of a king – indeed, of any head of state – was that he look and act like one. Edward, moreover, loved to participate in elaborate processions, and he encouraged a brilliant and entertaining court. But his high living had a darker side. He could be lazy and was something of a playboy. The former meant that he often relied on his brother, Richard, duke of Gloucester (1452–85), or his confidant, William, Lord Hastings (ca. 1430–83), to get things done. His attraction to beautiful women may explain his marriage in 1464 to Elizabeth Woodville (ca. 1437–92). The marriage with the otherwise obscure Woodville clan was highly controversial in Yorkist circles because it wrecked Warwick’s negotiations for a diplomatic union with a French princess. Moreover, Edward’s attempt to raise the Woodvilles’ prestige by showering them with favor did nothing for his relations with other nobles, like Warwick, who had longer and more distinguished records of Yorkist allegiance.

These cracks in the Yorkist affinity were all the more alarming because the Lancastrian threat remained. The late king, Henry VI, was very much at large until 1465, when he was captured and imprisoned in the Tower of London. His queen, Margaret, remained free in Scotland and had powerful allies in France where their son, the young Prince Edward (1453–71), was being sheltered. And there remained many Lancastrian noblemen, in Wales and the North especially, for whom the Wars of the Roses were not over. But it would be disgruntled Yorkists who revived them. In 1469 Warwick, joined by the king’s other brother, George, duke of Clarence (1449–78), rebelled. In the autumn of 1470 they went further, joining with Queen Margaret and King Louis XI (1423–83; reigned 1461–83) of France to liberate and reinstate Henry VI. King Edward was forced to flee to the Netherlands, but he returned in the following year and, supported once again by the fickle Clarence, defeated and slew Warwick on Easter Sunday (April 14) at the battle of Barnet in Hertfordshire (see map 4). Two weeks later the Yorkist forces defeated and killed Henry’s son, Prince Edward, at Tewkesbury in Gloucestershire. A few weeks after that, it was put about that the recently recaptured Henry had died “of pure displeasure and melancholy.” It is, of course, much more likely that he was murdered in the Tower on or about May 21, 1471.

The ever-present threat of Lancastrian revival obscured the fact that Edward's reign had many solid achievements. Most historians credit him with restoring the power and prestige of the Crown and Henry VII would copy or extend many of his policies. First, he revived the health of the royal finances by adding to them his holdings as duke of York, by confiscating the estates of his enemies (including the vast Duchy of Lancaster), by reviving old feudal laws allowing him to resume lands at the deaths of their owners, and, during the second half of his reign at least, by refusing to bestow lands on favorites and courtiers as the Lancastrians had done. Edward also increased his yield from Customs, first, by supervising the collectors more closely and, second, by pursuing peace with France, which promoted the recovery of international trade. Finally, he cut the size and expense of his household. As a result, he rarely had to ask Parliament for funds. This, in turn, weakened Parliament's leverage over the king.

Edward IV not only restored the government's finances; he also took measures to restore its reputation for efficiency, fairness, and honesty. While he concentrated power in the hands of a few great peers (Warwick, Gloucester, Hastings), below this level he appointed men to sensitive positions who were neither barons nor favorites but professionals (i.e., lawyers, merchants) and members of the gentry in good local standing who could get things done at court or in the countryside. His council included knights, gentlemen, judges, and attorneys, not just landed magnates. These types of individuals had two advantages over his more prominent subjects. First, none was so wealthy or powerful as to pose a challenge to his rule. Second, they gave the council practical expertise in the raising and prudent spending of money. This emphasis on loyalty and practicality is apparent further down the chain of command: when government officials inherited from the Lancastrians proved recalcitrant or disloyal, Edward employed his personal secretary as an embryonic secretary of state, and his household servants to enact policy and distribute funds. When old institutions could not be revitalized or bypassed, Edward and his advisers invented new ones. For example, he created a Council of the Marches to manage royal lands (and, later, to enforce law and order) in that sometimes rebellious region. These measures increased the power and efficiency of the Crown and reduced that of his "over-mighty" noble subjects. They also revived monarchical popularity by restoring peace and good government.

Unfortunately, Edward still had much work to do when he died suddenly, worn out (it was said from high living) at 40 on April 9, 1483. This brought to the throne his son, a boy of 12, who ascended as Edward V (1470–83?; reigned 1483). Like all boy-kings, his realm was to be administered for him by a Regency Council dominated by his uncles, among whom there was, unfortunately, no love lost. This was to have disastrous consequences. The most prominent of these royal relatives was the late king's surviving brother, Richard, duke of Gloucester.³ Gloucester realized at the outset that the position of the house of York was precarious and that all of the hard-won gains of the last reign were jeopardized by the king's youth. How could a 12-year-old boy preserve his throne and line against future Lancastrian rebellions? Moreover, Gloucester's own position as head of the

Regency Council was threatened by Edward's other uncles from the Woodville side of the family. That is, he saw two threats: one external, to Yorkist rule, from the Lancastrian house and nobility; the other internal, to him, from the late king's in-laws.

Gloucester solved his in-law problem first. At the late king's death, Edward, prince of Wales, was living with one of his Woodville uncles, Anthony, Earl Rivers (ca. 1440–83), in Wales; Gloucester was holding down the North. As the news of Edward IV's demise penetrated into the countryside, young Edward, accompanied by Rivers, began to move east toward London to claim his kingdom. Gloucester began to move south, along the way striking an alliance with Henry Stafford, duke of Buckingham (1455–83). Buckingham was one of the wealthiest and most powerful landowners in England and he was yet another descendant of Edward III. These two intercepted the royal party near Stony Stratford, Northamptonshire, on April 30 and had Rivers arrested on a charge of plotting against Gloucester. Thus Gloucester neutralized the Woodvilles and secured sole control of the new king. On May 4 Edward, Gloucester, and Buckingham entered London to the cheers of its populace. The council, dominated by Gloucester's allies, accepted his claim of a Woodville plot and declared him protector of the realm.

But none of these dramatic actions did anything to solve the duke of Gloucester's Lancastrian problem – or to satisfy his own ambitions. Historians will never know the precise motives for the actions he took next – though common sense suggests that they speak for themselves. In June 1483, he struck. At a council sitting on June 13 to plan Edward V's coronation, he accused the old king's lord chamberlain and confidant, Lord Hastings, of plotting against his life. Hastings was arrested immediately and beheaded without trial. With Hastings safely out of the way, Gloucester's allies took the opportunity to suggest that Edward IV, famous for his sexual escapades, had promised to marry another woman before his marriage to Elizabeth Woodville. This assertion, if true, would invalidate the Woodville marriage in canon law, thus rendering King Edward V and his younger brother, Richard, duke of York (1473–83?) illegitimate, and so leaving the duke of Gloucester the true Yorkist heir to the throne. Parliament, acting on this suggestion – and possibly fearing the consequences of rule by a small boy – declared the late king's marriage invalid. The duke of Gloucester was crowned King Richard III on July 6, 1483.

This still left the problem of the two royal nephews, Edward and Richard, currently housed in the Tower of London. As July faded into August, the two princes were seen playing in the Tower grounds less and less; finally, they were no longer seen at all. The obvious assumption is that Richard had the two boys murdered, as portrayed in Thomas More's *History of Richard III* and Shakespeare's play which was based on it. During renovations in 1674, two skeletons were found under a staircase which were assumed to be those of Edward and Richard and so were given royal burial. Forensic examination of the remains in 1933 suggested that their respective physical development was consistent with the ages of the two princes in 1483. While none of this *proves* Richard's guilt, he remains the most likely suspect. Still, alternative suspects have been suggested, such as the ambitious

duke of Buckingham. As a result, the question of who murdered the little princes in the Tower remains one of the great murder mysteries in English history,⁴ and will almost certainly never be fully solved. In fact, there may not have been a murder at all. There is some evidence that either one or both boys were ill in 1483. It is just possible that the two young men, living in the damp confines of the Tower, succumbed to natural causes. This would explain the new king's failure to address their situation publicly or produce their persons for display; after all, who would believe that their deaths were natural?

In fact, it did not matter who – or what – killed the princes. Contemporaries assumed that Richard did it. Whatever his responsibility or motivation, his ruthless ascent to the throne divided the Yorkist affinity and left a bad taste in the mouths of his subjects. He spent the remainder of his reign seeking to prove that he really wasn't such a bad guy after all. In fact, Richard III was not the hunch-backed monster portrayed in subsequent Tudor propaganda. He had proven an able and courageous warrior during the Wars of the Roses. He was intelligent and cultured and prudent enough to continue his brother's policies. The legislation passed by his parliaments was favorable to trade and the economy. Even his physical problems were exaggerated by the Tudors: he was short and seems to have had one shoulder slightly higher than the other, no more.

But the bloody opening of Richard's reign besmirched the Yorkist cause, his over-reliance on northerners offended established families in the south, and the flimsiness of his claim encouraged others to try for his throne. In the autumn of 1483 he put down a revolt by his erstwhile ally, Buckingham. The duke paid for his gamble, as did most rebels, with his head. In the summer of 1485, Richard faced another revolt, this time by a Welsh nobleman with only the most tenuous of Lancastrian claims, Henry Tudor, earl of Richmond. His father was Edmund Tudor, earl of Richmond (ca. 1430–56), a powerful Welsh landowner and the son of Catherine of Valois (1401–37), Henry V's widow, by her *second* husband, Owen Tudor (ca. 1400–61), who was not of royal blood at all. His mother was Lady Margaret Beaufort (1443–1509), a direct, but female, descendant of John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, by his *mistress*, Katherine Swynford (1350?–1403; see genealogy 2, p. 430), whom Gaunt later married, thus legitimizing the line. This provided a claim, but nothing stronger than those of about half-a-dozen other English peers. Nevertheless, when the Lancastrian cause collapsed in 1471, Richmond's lineage forced him into continental exile. There, he bided his time and attempted to shore up support among the Lancastrian nobility.

In August 1485 he returned, landing with perhaps 2,000 supporters, including French and Scottish troops, at Milford Haven, Wales. Important noble families flocked to his side, not so much out of loyalty to him as dissatisfaction with a usurper king. As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, the rival armies met at Bosworth Field, Leicestershire, on August 22. Richard found out just how weak his support was when, soon after the opening of battle, the powerful Stanley family and their followers deserted for Richmond's side. Indeed, it was actually a party of Stanley retainers who killed the king after he had been unhorsed in a brave but desperate charge of Henry's bodyguard. The sun of the house of York

had set. The day belonged to the house of Richmond – or, as, it is now more popularly known, the house of Tudor.

Establishing the Tudor State

By 1485, England had experienced civil war for well over three decades, and an uncertain succession for almost a century. The new king's prospects could not have seemed promising. He was only 28 years old. He had no affinity, no important friends, no experience of government. He had not even run his own estates, having spent his youth on the run, first in Brittany and then, from 1484, in France. Moreover, there remained in play a clutch of Yorkist pretenders to the throne, some with better claims than Henry. There was, for example, John de la Pole, earl of Lincoln (ca. 1460–87), the nephew of both Edward IV and Richard III and the latter's designated heir. There was also Edward, earl of Warwick (1475–99), and his sister Margaret, countess of Salisbury (1473–1541), the children of the duke of Clarence. Later, Henry, marquess of Exeter (ca. 1498–1538), a grandson of Edward IV, would become a factor. Finally, for the romantically inclined, it should not be forgotten that the bodies of Edward V and his brother, Richard, duke of York, had never been found. This would give rise to the fifteenth-century equivalent of "Elvis-sightings" and therefore the possibility that an impostor could play on the nostalgic credulity of the populace. That possibility might be exploited by enemies abroad: Margaret, duchess of Burgundy (1446–1503), sister of Edward IV and Richard III, could provide a continental base of operations and sanctuary well out of Henry's reach. As we will see, the French, the Scots, the Irish, even the Holy Roman emperor might find it in their interests to dislodge Henry or destabilize his regime. After all, the rulers of Brittany and France had done as much for Henry against the Yorkists; just like rebellious barons, they might not find it easy to break the habit.

But the Wars of the Roses did end. Henry VII did establish his authority, and his dynasty as well: the Tudors would rule England for well over a century, effectively and, for the most part, unchallenged. How did he – and they – do it? Before we can answer that question, it is necessary to understand what sort of man he was. His image (see plate 2) provides some clues. Henry Tudor was shrewd, tight-lipped, suspicious, and intensely practical. Like many late medieval rulers, he anticipated the sort of prince described in Machiavelli's book of that name: ruthless, capable of sharp practice and even cruelty if necessary. The result would have pleased the author of *The Prince* (written 1513, pub. 1532), for in the words of one contemporary: "The King is feared rather than loved."⁵ But where cruelty was not necessary, Henry VII was content to let sleeping dogs lie. That is, while he forgot nothing, he tended not to hold grudges or engage in personal vendettas.

This practical side of Henry's character led earlier historians to identify him as a more or less "modern" personality and, indeed, his behavior can sometimes remind one of a twenty-first-century CEO. But Henry was born in the fifteenth

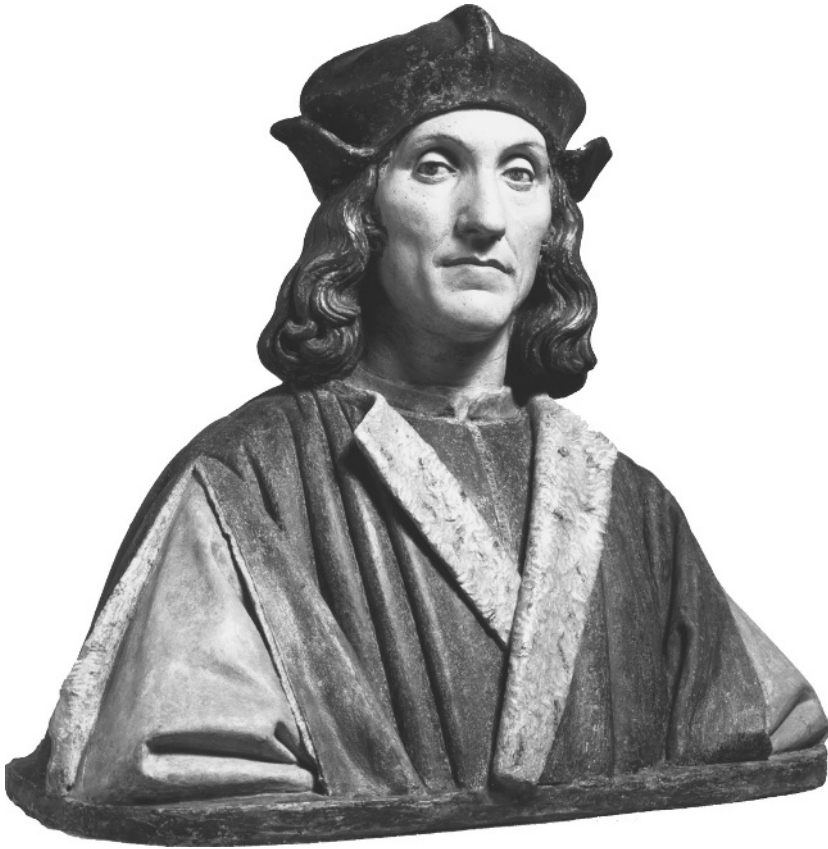


Plate 2 *Henry VII, painted terracotta bust, by Pietro Torrigiano. © The Board of Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum.*

century and many of his habits were purely medieval. He was a loyal son of the Church who burned **heretics**, heard multiple daily masses, and spent £20,000 building the glorious chapel in Westminster Abbey which bears his name and enshrines his body, along with those of many of his descendants. A firm believer in **Purgatory**, and perhaps out of concern for what all that practicality and ruthlessness had done to the state of his soul, he left money at his death to pay for the celebration of 10,000 masses.

Finally, there is one further aspect of Henry's personality which may be interpreted as either medieval or modern or, perhaps, both at once: his instinct for ceremony and propaganda. Like Edward IV, Henry VII knew that a king must be seen to be magnificent. He mounted elaborate processions and commissioned works of art to show himself and his regime in the best possible light. At the same time, artists and writers were encouraged to trash the memory of Richard III and the Yorkists as much as possible. This even extended to having paintings of the late king altered to increase the size of his hunchback's hump! No modern politician was better at going negative.

The new king demonstrated his hard-headedness and practicality immediately after seizing the throne. The first thing Henry did upon his triumphant arrival in London was to get himself crowned, on October 30. Only then, on November 7, did he assemble a parliament. Thus, rather than seek its permission to claim the throne (as Henry Bolingbroke had seemed to do), he simply informed them of the already accomplished fact. He then had them ruin the most powerful Yorkist peers via attainder, but he left those of lesser power and wealth alone. In fact, Henry VII continued to employ mid-level Yorkists and former servants of the Yorkists in his administration. That is, he destroyed those who had the potential to challenge him, while offering his protection and favor to those who were not a threat. This accomplished three purposes. First, it led many former Yorkists at this level to switch sides to the new king. Second, it deprived possible Yorkist pretenders to the throne of a rank-and-file. Third, it ensured that the new administration would continue to function with the smooth precision of its Yorkist predecessor, because it would largely be the same administration. Later, in 1495, Henry signed into law the *De facto* Act, which exempted from prosecution anyone acting on the orders of an English king. The idea was to reassure old Yorkists that he had no intention of pursuing them further for past actions, while encouraging his own followers by promising indemnity against the resentment of some future ruler for obeying his orders.

Henry's willingness to embrace Yorkists received its ultimate expression in his choice of a consort. Five months after Bosworth Field, in fulfillment of a promise he had made in 1483, he married the Princess Elizabeth (1466–1503), daughter of Edward IV, elder sister of the two princes who had died in the Tower – and therefore the niece of Henry's mortal enemy, Richard III. At this late date, it is impossible to judge the feelings that may have existed between Henry and Elizabeth. Every indication is that their marriage became a solid one, producing eight children (though only three survived their parents). But its beginning seems to have been a matter of pure calculation: on the one hand, it was the clearest signal yet that Henry intended to bury the hatchet with the Yorkists. On the other hand, by waiting five months after his accession, the new king also made clear that his Crown was in no way contingent on a Yorkist alliance. Above all, this union resulted in the mingling of Yorkist, Lancastrian, and Tudor blood. In September 1486, Queen Elizabeth gave birth to a son. Even the choice of name for the new prince was calculated: Arthur (1486–1502). This name was, of course, symbolic of English (and Welsh) unity and seemed to pledge that the monarchy would return to its former greatness.

Finally, in the spring of 1486, Henry made a progress through the North, the most "Yorkist" of his dominions. His purpose was, first, to show himself to his people in full kingly magnificence; but also to demonstrate that he was backed by a large and powerful entourage. Just in case anyone missed the point, that entourage arrested the earl of Warwick, one of the most prominent Yorkist claimants to the throne.

These were shrewd measures, but die-hard Yorkists stayed restless. Since most Yorkist claimants were either too young, too dead, or safely deposited in the

Tower, these attempts tended to involve “pretenders to the throne,” i.e., impostors. In 1487 a boy named Lambert Simnel (b. 1476/7, d. after 1534), the son of a baker, was passed off by the Yorkists as the imprisoned Warwick. On May 5 Simnel, accompanied by the earl of Lincoln (a real Yorkist claimant) and 2,000 German mercenary troops supplied by Margaret of Burgundy, landed in Ireland, where Yorkist support was strong. There, Gerald Fitzgerald, earl of Kildare (ca. 1456–1513), the lord deputy and most prominent Anglo-Irish landowner in the island, recognized Simnel as king. On June 4 his forces, augmented by Irish troops, landed in Lancashire and marched south on the capital. Perhaps because the country was weary of war, perhaps because Henry was proving an effective ruler, the rebels gained little support. A royal army met and defeated them at East Stoke, outside Newark, Nottinghamshire. Conveniently for Henry, Lincoln died in battle. As for Simnel, Henry made him a servant in the royal kitchens: the first Tudor was not without mercy or a sense of humor.

These qualities would be tested a few years later by another adolescent impostor, Perkin Warbeck (ca. 1474–99). Warbeck, the son of a Flemish government official, was, apparently, a remarkably well-dressed young man. In 1491 the inhabitants of Cork, Ireland, mistook him for the long-dead Richard, duke of York. (Henry later remarked with exasperation: “My lords of Ireland, you will crown apes at last.”⁶) No one in England seems to have believed that Warbeck was Richard, but the Yorkists nevertheless seized the opportunity. Margaret of Burgundy coached him on how to act and the rulers of France, Scotland, and the Holy Roman Empire went along with the charade for political reasons of their own. In fact, he even managed to marry into the Scottish royal house and use Scotland as a base from which to attack Henry. But successive invasions of England were beaten off in 1495, 1496, and 1497. In the last case, Warbeck joined a preexisting rebellion in Cornwall against high taxes. In early summer some 15,000 Cornishmen had marched on London; they were defeated at Blackheath, on its southern outskirts on 17 June. Warbeck only showed up in September. Though some 3,000 additional Cornishmen joined his cause, he was soon captured. Like Simnel, he was spared at first but, after evidence emerged – or was fabricated – that he had been plotting yet another revolt with the real earl of Warwick, both were executed in 1499. This represents the last serious challenge to Henry’s regime. By the 1490s, if not earlier, English men and women were heartily sick of civil wars and pretend kings and had decided to settle for the sovereign they had.

Nevertheless, these incidents convinced Henry of the dangers of isolation. It was not enough to overawe, satisfy, or neutralize his own subjects; he needed friends abroad. After all, he had used France as a base from which to launch his own rebellion against Richard III and his enemies had found support in Burgundy, France, Scotland, and the Holy Roman Empire. Henry began by trying to win over the king of France, Charles VIII (1470–98; reigned 1483–98), but the latter was not interested. Henry responded in 1489 by throwing his support to the rebellious nobles of Brittany, claiming the throne of France for himself, and, in 1492, launching an invasion from Calais. This got the French king’s attention.

The result was the Treaty of Étaples, by which Henry agreed to withdraw in return for a subsidy of £5,000 for 15 years.⁷ Similarly, from 1493 to 1496, Henry used trade embargoes against Burgundy and the Holy Roman Empire to persuade them to withdraw their support for Perkin Warbeck. Next, Henry set out to secure his northern flank. King James IV of Scotland (1473–1513; reigned 1488–1513) had provided Warbeck with valuable support and an easy route into England. Henry won him over by offering a diplomatic marriage with Henry's daughter, Margaret (1489–1541). Truces in 1497 and 1499 were solidified in the optimistically titled Treaty of Perpetual Peace of 1502; the marriage took place the next year. While this alliance did not prevent future antagonism with the Scots, it did link the two royal houses. That would lead to a Stuart accession in England after the death of the last Tudor in 1603.

But Henry's greatest diplomatic coup was his alliance with Spain. In the 1480s Spain's situation was not unlike that of England: after a period of division and weakness, it had just been united under the rule of Ferdinand of Aragon (1452–1516; reigned 1479–1516) and Isabella of Castile (1451–1504; reigned 1479–1504). This new dynasty needed friends too, especially against its powerful northern neighbor, France. So, in 1489, England and Spain signed the Treaty of Medina del Campo, by which Henry promised (1) military support against France and (2) his son, Arthur, in marriage to Ferdinand and Isabella's daughter, Catherine of Aragon (1485–1536). Since the two royal children were well under age, the marriage did not take place until November 1501. The Tudor court put on weeks of festivals, feasts, tournaments, and dancing. Well might Henry have been in a celebratory mood, for by 1501 Spain had acquired a great empire, thanks to the explorations of Columbus (1451–1506) and others. Henry's courtship of this up-and-coming country looked to be a fabulous success.

Unfortunately, Prince Arthur died five months after his marriage. This jeopardized the Spanish alliance, the cornerstone of Henry's foreign policy. Fortunately, or so it seemed at the time, King Henry had another son, also named Henry (1491–1547), whom he offered to Catherine. But Ferdinand, a cagey negotiator, demanded the return of Catherine's dowry. Spain was now a major power and might hope for a more advantageous match; moreover, the Tudors, down to their last heir in the male line, did not look like such a good investment as they had done a decade earlier. The death of Queen Elizabeth early in 1503 further weakened Tudor prospects. But if Ferdinand was a hard bargainer, so was Henry VII. He stopped payment of Catherine's allowance of £1,200 a year and stripped her of her household. Now a widower himself, he began to negotiate with other European powers for an alternative, not only for his son but for himself. In the end, Henry's own death in April 1509 settled the issue. At the urging of his council, the new king, Henry VIII (reigned 1509–47), decided to go ahead with the marriage to Catherine. After a papal dispensation allowing Henry to marry his brother's widow, the most fateful wedding in English history took place in June 1509. Thus, by the end of Henry VII's reign, it appeared that England was surrounded by, if not friends, then, at least, relatives. Henry VII's successful foreign policy, combined with his cultivation of good relations with the Church, ensured

that, at the accession of his son, the new dynasty would have no great external enemies. What about its internal situation?

At this point, it might be useful to say something about the structure of English government at the end of the fifteenth century. At its center was, of course, the king, “the life, the head, and the authority of all things that be done in the realm of England.”⁸ In some sense, the whole kingdom was his property and a strong king set the agenda for his government, but this did not mean that his power was absolute. It is often popularly assumed that a medieval or early modern king’s word was law, that what he said “went,” and that there was little room for disagreement. This assumption is probably based upon bad historical films and our modern experience of living under powerful, omnipresent governments, with their multiple departments, vast military and naval forces, and “high-tech” methods of surveillance and coercion. English royal government during the early modern period was not, in fact, like that. First, it was small: perhaps 1,500 officials in Henry VII’s reign. Secondly, as we have seen, it was also poor: early modern kings were almost invariably in debt and had to ask Parliament’s permission to raise taxes. In part because it was so small and poor, in part because no one expected much from it, the responsibilities of early modern government were much fewer than those of its modern equivalent. There was no standing army, no Federal Bureau of Investigation or Metropolitan Police Force, no Internal Revenue Service or national postal service, no Medicare or National Health Service or government loans for deserving students.

Because his government was small and poor, a wise king sought the advice and cooperation of his greatest subjects. In times of emergency he might do so via Parliament, as Henry VII did seven times (1485, 1487, 1489, 1491, 1495, 1497, and 1504), but for day-to-day matters he turned to the king’s council. This consisted, before Henry VII’s reign, mostly of important landowners and department heads, the majority of whom were peers or bishops. Because so many wanted the honor of counseling the king, this body was often vast and unwieldy. As a result, late medieval and early modern sovereigns tended to rely upon a trusted inner circle of about 10 to 20 such councilors. By the middle of the sixteenth century the Tudors would institutionalize this smaller, more effective group as the “Privy Council.” In the meantime, the king’s council dealt with a wide variety of matters: the administration of royal lands, taxation and justice in the localities, the arbitration of disputes between powerful men, diplomacy, and the defense of the realm. Since the late Middle Ages it had also met as a court of law in a room at Westminster Palace known for its ceiling decoration as the “camera stellata” or **Star Chamber**. The Court of Star Chamber dealt with such matters as riot, conspiracy, forgery, defamation, and perjury. It was more efficient than other courts because it did not have years of tradition – or many privileges for the accused – to get in the way of swift deliberation. As a higher court, it could rule against the wealthy and powerful when lower courts might not dare; as a court of equity it was not strictly bound by the law. As a result, its justice could be swift – and arbitrary, which explains the modern, sinister, associations of its name. Royal decisions which had emerged from debate in council were later framed as Orders

in Council, in part to demonstrate that the king had consulted with the most prominent people in the realm.

The king's council was considered part of his court or household. At its most basic level, the household provided for simple domestic needs: food and drink, linen, fuel, etc. for the king, his family, those of his servants who lived at court, and guests. At the English court these functions were fulfilled by a department known as the Household Below Stairs, presided over by a great officer called the lord steward. But a court was far more than a domestic establishment. It was the epicenter of national political, social, and cultural life as well as the great stage upon which the theater of monarchy was acted. It was in the splendid halls and corridors of the king's palaces at Westminster and elsewhere that political business, influence, and intrigue were carried on; the socially prominent (and those ambitious to be so) amused themselves and just "hung out"; the leading authors, artists, and musicians sought patronage and set the trends of fashion; and the sovereign staged splendid processions, feasts, and entertainments designed to remind his guests, foreign and domestic, that he was God's lieutenant on earth. The Chamber, presided over by the lord chamberlain, oversaw the court's ceremonial and artistic life. It employed numerous gentlemen, drawn from every part of the realm, whose job was to give their attendance in the court's public rooms, especially the Hall (where the king's courtiers and officers were fed) and the Presence Chamber (where he could be seen on his throne). Because everybody who thought themselves anybody flocked to these rooms seeking the sovereign's attention and favor, late medieval kings found that they had little privacy. As a result, in the 1490s Henry VII created a new room and set of officials beyond the Presence Chamber called the Privy Chamber, to which he could retreat in search of peace, relative solitude, and, perhaps, greater safety from assassination. Unfortunately, the admiring throng pursued him and his successors even here. To provide additional security, as well as to increase the magnificence of his court, Henry also built on Yorkist precedent by creating a royal bodyguard, the yeomen of the guard.

Early in the Middle Ages most of the king's business had been conducted by household servants acting in his name on an ad hoc basis. That is, the king's treasure was stored in chests in his Chamber. His weaponry and munitions for war were purchased by the department which normally supplied his furniture, the Great Wardrobe. If he wished to make diplomatic contact with another ruler, or convey his commands to a powerful magnate in the localities, he sent a court officer. While this still happened, by the end of the fifteenth century many of these functions had "gone out of court." That is, they were performed by separate departments with their own heads and chains of command according to fixed procedures. Among these offices was the Chancery, originally the king's writing office. Here, the lord chancellor, often a bishop, kept the Great Seal of England, which was affixed to important documents such as acts of parliament and grants of land. But by 1485, the lord chancellor's primary function was to preside over the court of Chancery, which administered equity jurisdiction where the common law (see below) was inadequate or in which a strict application of its rules would

lead to a miscarriage of justice. That is, the court of Chancery existed to correct injustice stemming from the strict application of the law. No wonder the lord chancellor was called “the keeper of the king’s conscience.” Chancery clerical functions had been taken over by the office of the Privy Seal, which was a less elaborate royal seal attached to grants of offices and pensions. The Privy Seal office, staffed mostly by clerks, was the clearing house for general government business.

The office which stored and accounted for the king’s money was the Exchequer, presided over by the treasurer (from the sixteenth century, “lord treasurer”). This office combined the functions of a private banker, tax-collecting agency, accountancy firm, and a law court to oversee taxation disputes. It received its name from the checkered cloth, like a checkerboard, upon which, during the Middle Ages, amounts of money received were marked by counters – necessary because many sheriffs, responsible for receiving and submitting taxation, were illiterate. By the late fifteenth century the procedures of the Exchequer were becoming stultified, full of pointless tradition and red tape. As a result, it took years to pass an account and it was virtually impossible for the king to know at any given time how much money he had. In response, Edward IV and Henry VII began to turn back to their household officers, in particular the treasurer of the Chamber, to handle their finances. By the early 1490s the Chamber was receiving over 90 percent of the king’s revenue and its treasurer was the most important financial officer in the kingdom. This was a less public system of government finance, but it gave these late fifteenth-century monarchs greater flexibility and more control than that afforded by the “official” government departments.

In addition to the courts of Chancery and Exchequer, there were in London common law courts of King’s Bench and Common Pleas, the former for cases, both civil and criminal, in which the Crown was involved, the latter for civil suits, especially those involving property, contract, or debt, between subjects. Common law was the body of law that had evolved out of judicial precedent and custom. It was uncoded, as opposed to statute law, which was created by acts passed by Parliament and approved by the king. As we have seen, Parliament consisted of the House of Lords and the House of Commons, both of which met at Westminster. Every male peer had the right to sit in the Lords, as did bishops and, before the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 1530s, abbots of great monasteries. This provided an upper house of perhaps 100 to 110 members. The House of Commons may sound, from its title, more representative of the English people, but it was, in reality, only marginally so. There were two members of parliament or MPs (the abbreviation only applies to those in the lower house) for every county. These were called “knights of the shire.” In addition, every major borough, i.e., city or town, was supposed to be represented by up to two members. This yielded about 300 members in 1500, but by the end of the Tudor period in 1603 England’s expanding borough population would be represented by 460 members.⁹ That number would become more or less frozen thereafter. This meant that towns which grew into major cities in the seventeenth century might have no MP, while parliamentary constituencies which declined to few or no inhabitants retained

theirs, leaving their landlords with the power to simply name their members. For example, the original site of the old city of Salisbury, called Old Sarum, was by 1500 a nearly vacant hilltop, but it still had the right to send two MPs to Westminster. As a result, its owner simply appointed those members, who, presumably, followed his orders. Such a member was said to be in his patron's pocket – hence the term “pocket borough.”

As noted in the Introduction, any male owning land worth 40 shillings (£2) annually could vote for his county's knights of the shire. In most boroughs, the vote was restricted to an inside group of civic leaders (the **corporation**) or those who lived in a certain part of town. These restrictions varied from constituency to constituency; overall, a bit less than 3 percent of English and Welsh males, perhaps 30,000 people, had a vote. As a result, most members of the lower house were not so much elected as *selected* by a dominant local landowner, or a few leading townsmen. Contests between candidates were rare. The MPs themselves tended to be prominent members of the classes who selected them: great landowners, wealthy merchants or, in a few cases, leading attorneys or professional men. Thus, “election” to Parliament was usually a sign of local social status, not a career move. As a result, *both* houses of Parliament tended to represent the views of the upper class, not the common man or woman.

Parliament's very existence was entirely at the sovereign's will. That is, only he could summon a parliament to meet, prorogue it (suspend its meeting until needed again), or dissolve it (send the members home and call for elections to a new parliament). Indeed, many historians refer to parliaments in the plural for this period, to emphasize that it was more of an event than an institution, with no claim to existence beyond the monarch's whim. Given that a sitting parliament had the right to petition the sovereign for redress of grievance and to impeach (try) his ministers for misconduct; and that, in the fifteenth century, its members had often criticized those ministers (and, by implication, the monarch himself) for conduct of foreign policy, corruption, incompetence, or courtly extravagance, one might wonder why a late medieval or early modern ruler would ever summon such a body? The chief reason was money. Kings were notoriously short of it, yet could not impose a tax without parliamentary approval. Moreover, such approval could be useful to a king pursuing a controversial policy, such as a war or a trade embargo, because it could be offered as evidence that the nation had been consulted. Still, late-fifteenth-century rulers kept such occasions to minimum: Parliament sat, on average, only 24 days a year under the Yorkists, 18 days a year under Henry VII. After 1495, Henry called only two parliaments, which sat for an average of just eight days a year.

When parliaments did meet, government officials took the lead by spelling out royal policies and needs, while members raised grievances. Either could result in petitions for legislation. Whichever house originated a petition debated it. If approved by a vote, it was then engrossed as a bill. Each bill had to undergo two readings, each one also subject to debate and vote, before it could be sent to the other house to repeat the process of engrossment, readings, debates, and votes. If a bill was approved through each of these steps it was said to have passed and

was then submitted to the sovereign, who could attach his seal to it, by which it became an act of parliament (a law or statute); or veto it, in which case it was lost at least until the next session.

Once passed, a law had to be administered and enforced. In the country at large, the king employed up to 40 administrators of Crown lands (who supervised an army of stewards, bailiffs, keepers, and wardens) and up to 90 Customs officials to collect his revenues. He also appointed traveling *assize* judges to provide royal justice in major felony cases, biannually, to the shire court of each county. Since the king did not otherwise have bureaucrats “on the ground” to enforce his will or a standing army to coerce obedience, he had to rely on the cooperation of his most important subjects for everything else. We have already seen that in frontier areas, such as the Welsh Marches, the Anglo-Scottish border, or the Irish Pale, late-medieval kings depended on powerful local magnates and their affinities to enforce order. In fact, they relied on the local nobility to keep a watch on every county, a duty which would, by the mid-sixteenth century, evolve into the office of *lord lieutenant* of the shire. Such magnates also held numerous other local posts: as constables of royal castles, keepers of royal forests, stewards of royal manors. These positions paid well in both money and prestige for very little work, and were therefore eagerly sought by ambitious noblemen.

Supporting these locally significant nobles were the gentry, whose members might serve as sheriffs or justices of the peace (JPs). The sheriff collected taxes, impaneled juries for shire courts, and, early in the period, raised the militia. He was unpaid and the position, though honorific, was also onerous – not least because he was liable in law for taxes which he had failed to collect. In 1461, most of his law enforcement powers were transferred to JPs. Most counties had scores of JPs, acting as judges in legal and economic disputes, including less serious felonies, twice a year at the assizes, four times a year at meetings of the shire court called quarter sessions, and, on a more ad hoc basis as needed, at petty sessions. In cities the king relied on the corporation – the mayor and aldermen – whose power he had granted by means of the borough’s charter. In all these roles, since he could not afford to provide salaries, he depended on the good will of those he asked to serve. That good will might not be forthcoming if local officials or their neighbors thought the monarch’s requests unreasonable. This explains why the king of England did not always get his own way.

Henry VII adopted and improved the structure of government that he inherited from the Yorkists to make it a more efficient and effective instrument of rule. He did this by reviving three old principles of medieval kingship, long forgotten by the Lancastrians and revived only briefly by the Yorkists:

The king must be strong.

The king must govern with consent.

The king must live of his own.

First, the king must be strong. Henry had, of course, demonstrated his strength by defeating Richard III and later usurpers in battle. Away from the battlefield, he

was a vigorous, hard-working king. As indicated above, he often bypassed normal channels (such as the Exchequer), running government personally out of his household. He could innovate, as when he created new subgroups of the council such as the Council Learned in the Law to prosecute disloyal or feuding aristocrats. Above all, he sought to keep the nobility, of whom he was exceedingly wary, in check. Unlike Henry VI, he was very sparing in distributing titles, honors, and lands. Unlike Edward IV, he avoided over-reliance on a few mighty peers like a Warwick or a Gloucester. Rather, he revived a different Edwardian strategy by encouraging Parliament to attack noble affinities through a Statute Against Liveries in 1487, renewed and amplified in 1504. These laws outlawed unauthorized private noble armies (whose uniforms were referred to as liveries). He also used attainder, the threat of attainder, or his power to forgive an attainder as a way of keeping over-mighty subjects on probation and off balance. As the reign wore on, he increasingly imposed on offending nobles exorbitant recognizances or bonds requiring them to pay huge sums of money (sometimes thousands of pounds). These would not necessarily be collected; rather, they would be kept on file as a noble pledge – and a royal threat – against future rebellious behavior. By the time of the king's death in 1509, some three-quarters of the peerage were, or had been, laboring under an attainder, recognizance, or some other financial penalty. According to one of his closest advisers/enforcers, Edmund Dudley (ca. 1462–1510), the king wished “to have many persons in his danger at his pleasure.”¹⁰ This led contemporaries to accuse Henry of greed and vindictiveness and goes far to explain why, at his death in 1509, he does not appear to have been much lamented. But it is difficult to argue with the results of his policies: the restoration of royal authority and political order, the elimination of effective aristocratic opposition and violence, and the firm establishment of the new dynasty.

If Henry was strong, he nevertheless sought advice and support for his policies, though not necessarily from his nobility. As the Statutes Against Liveries suggest, Henry was careful to secure parliamentary support of controversial measures. He was also careful to follow Edward IV's precedent of summoning a large council of 20 to 30. He did this, first, so that no one would dominate but himself; and, second, in order to include gentlemen, merchants, and attorneys. His closest advisers and henchmen tended to be lawyers of gentry background, like the aforementioned Dudley, Sir Reginald Bray (ca. 1440–1503), or Sir Richard Empson (ca. 1450–1510). As under Edward, this had multiple virtues. First, such men were not sufficiently powerful in themselves to pose a challenge to the king's rule. Second, they could offer practical advice on the economy, the law, and other matters. Third, because they owed everything to the king, they could be counted on to do the dirty work of revenue collection, surveillance, and intimidation. Along the same lines, Henry VII increased the power of his JPs against that of the more socially prominent (but not always honest or efficient) magnates and sheriffs. In particular, he authorized them to seek out unlawful retainers and to investigate complaints of extortion by government officials. Finally, Henry's revival of court ceremonies and entertainments indicates that he understood the propaganda value in securing an appearance of consent and approval for royal policies. This is not

to imply that he had to deal with a free press (it did not exist), public opinion polls, or public opinion itself in the modern sense. Rather, in this context, consent meant that people were reasonably satisfied with his rule and unlikely to seek out or support an alternative.

One reason for that satisfaction was Henry VII's financial probity. Theoretically, the king owned so much property and received so much money out of rents and Customs duties that he should have been able to live "of his own." That is, his "ordinary" revenue was supposed to be sufficient for him to run his household, pay the salaries of his officials, and pursue domestic policy without having to call a parliament to vote him any "extraordinary" revenue in new taxes. Such extraordinary revenue was only to be raised in emergencies, such as a state of rebellion or war. Unfortunately the previous century, with its recurrent rebellions and wars, had often seemed like one long emergency. The Lancastrians, in particular, had repeatedly asked Parliament for tax increases to pay for the Hundred Years' War and their part in the Wars of the Roses. Moreover, the Crown lands and Customs revenue had been so devastated by these wars and so poorly administered by corrupt officials that those monarchs had to ask for additional parliamentary funds just to keep their domestic establishments running. As a result, the English taxpayer and his representatives in Parliament were increasingly hostile to new taxes, as indicated by the Cornish rebellion.

Henry VII was shrewd enough to see that this had to stop. He sought to live almost entirely on his ordinary revenue by exploiting carefully its four sources. First, he increased the amount of Crown lands. As king he inherited both the Lancastrian and Yorkist estates, and he brought Tudor lands with him. Rather than dispense these to his nobility as previous kings had done, his parliaments passed five acts of resumption *revoking* previous grants of royal land. He also pursued feudal escheats, that is, lands which were supposed to be forfeit to the Crown on the deaths of their holders. Finally, his aggressive policy of seeking acts of attainder against his principal enemies brought yet more land into his hands. By 1504, the clear yield from Crown lands (that is, the profits from rents and the sale of crops and minerals) had risen from about £29,000 a year to £42,000 a year.

An equally important component of the ordinary revenue was the yield from Customs duties on wool and other commodities. This, too, had fallen during the previous century, largely because the wars had wrecked trade. Henry rectified the problem by embracing a mostly peaceful foreign policy and trade agreements with foreign powers, as we have seen. This sent the Customs yield from £33,000 a year to over £41,000 a year. Third, Henry pursued more aggressively dues and fines owed to the Crown as its feudal right, including fees on inheritances, **wardships**, and the marriage of underage or widowed royal tenants. The annual yield from these sources rose from a mere £343 in 1491 to £6,000 in 1507. Fourth, his more efficient administration exploited legal fines and fees. Finally, Henry VII, like Edward IV, was not above investing in trading voyages, accepting a pension from the French king, or extorting loans and "benevolences" from his subjects without their permission. As a result of these policies, Henry VII's total revenue rose to about £113,000

a year, the vast majority of it raised from ordinary sources, by 1502. Consequently, he rarely had to call Parliament during the last years of his reign.

Henry VII died in 1509, leaving his successor a full treasury, an efficient government, a stable regime, a potential wife, and – despite the grumbling of a subdued nobility – a loyal nation. While he was neither beloved nor even popular, he commanded the respect and fear of his subjects. The first Tudor king had succeeded in establishing his dynasty. Unfortunately, he left that achievement in the hands of his 17-year-old heir – Henry VIII.

Young King Hal

If ever a king has captured the imagination of the general public, both during his reign and after, it is Henry VIII. It is very largely his image, “cock-sure and truculent, astride one of Holbein’s canvases” (see plate 3), which we conjure when we think of a king.¹¹ For those who grew up in the twentieth century, it is difficult to separate the image in our mind’s eye from that created by film actors like Charles Laughton, Robert Shaw, Richard Burton, Keith Michel – even Benny Hill: that of a vain and corpulent lecher, eating, whoring, and executing his way through marriage after marriage, ministry after ministry. Like most popular historical orthodoxies, this one contains a grain of truth – not least in its conveyance of Henry’s “larger than life” personality. But it contains much distortion as well. The worst result of the uncritical reception of that distorted image is that it reduces perhaps the single most important watershed in English history – the Reformation – to the by-product of a single man’s foibles and appetites. This may be an acceptable cinematic interpretation, but, as we shall see, the truth is far more subtle, more complicated, and more interesting.

In fact, Henry’s contemporaries were almost universally impressed with him, especially toward the beginning of his reign. And why not? He was handsome and athletic, a skilled horseman who loved tilting, falconry, wrestling, and dancing. But Henry was more than a royal jock. He had a mind as agile as his body. Like Plato’s philosopher-king, Henry had studied mathematics as well as Greek, Latin, French, Italian, and Spanish. He corresponded with Erasmus (ca. 1467–1536) and befriended Sir Thomas More, two of the era’s greatest philosophers. Indeed, his court was a hotbed of humanist scholarship. The king himself wrote a theological treatise, *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*, attacking the new reformist ideas of Martin Luther (1483–1546). A grateful papacy rewarded Henry with the title *Defensor Fidei* (“Defender of the Faith”) in 1521. Henry was also artistic and, in particular, musical. He sang, played the lute, the organ, and the virginals (a primitive harpsichord) and composed masses, songs, and anthems. He patronized professional artists and musicians, providing employment for the likes of the portraitist Hans Holbein (1497–1543), the composer Thomas Tallis (ca. 1505–85), and the polymath singer, actor, composer, and playwright William Cornyshe (ca. 1465–1523).



Plate 3 Henry VIII, after Hans Holbein the Younger. Board of the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside. © Walker Art Gallery, National Museums, Liverpool.

Finally, Henry VIII could be generous to friends, charming to acquaintances, and attractively flamboyant in the presence of his subjects. During the first half of his reign, especially, he brought the aristocracy back to court by sponsoring an endless round of jousts, tilts, **mumming**, dancing, wrestling, revels, and pageants for New Year's Day, Epiphany, **Shrovetide**, the return of the king at the end of the summer, and Christmas-time. Unlike his father, who merely presided, Henry VIII participated actively in these events, appearing in tournaments as Hercules, St. George, and other heroes: indeed, his skill in knightly combat enhanced his military reputation. His court was a moveable feast, progressing in an annual circuit around London among the half-dozen larger palaces and the numerous smaller houses which he owned. Henry did this because the 300–400 people comprising his household entourage soon overwhelmed the primitive waste disposal facilities of any given house; because he understood the need to show himself and the splendor of his court to his subjects; and finally because he was notoriously restless and hankered after new sights and sounds. After the careful sobriety of Henry VII's last years, the English people were, perhaps, ready for a little "flash," a little festivity, and, if they lived in the Home Counties, a great deal more contact with their ruler. Henry VIII was just the man to give it to them.

But underneath the new king's charming and exuberant exterior beat a heart which was every bit as cold and calculating, if not as cautious, as his dad's. Henry VIII was emotional, brooding, impulsive, greedy, unforgiving, lazy, and utterly self-centered. He seems to have felt no loyalty to any particular set of policy goals or persons. Perhaps because, for all his swagger, he was, down deep, profoundly insecure, he seems to have been swayed easily by whichever set of courtiers happened to have his ear. As a result, according to his biographer, Lord Herbert of Cherbury (?1582–1648), "Impressions privately given to the king by any court-whisperer were hardly or never to be effaced."¹² This endangered anyone not currently in the royal presence, and engendered a court life of ruthless competition and vicious intrigue. No one could feel secure. Henry VIII sacked advisers, favorites, ministers, wives as it pleased him. On the second day of the reign he imprisoned, and would eventually execute, two of his father's most loyal, effective, and therefore unpopular tax collectors, Edmund Dudley and Sir Richard Empson. This was a popular move, especially with aristocrats feeling oppressed by his father's financial exactions. But it was also needlessly cruel, arbitrary, and utterly disloyal to two faithful Crown servants. This break with the past set a precedent for the future: Henry VIII would seek the judicial murder of two queens, three cardinals, numerous peers and clergymen, and nearly every principal minister who ever served him. His last would-be victim, Thomas Howard, duke of Norfolk (1473–1554), was languishing in the Tower of London on the eve of his beheading, when Henry himself died, thus negating the warrant, on January 28, 1547. Finally, where Henry VII had remained loyal to Queen Elizabeth, Henry VIII pursued several extra-marital affairs and fathered at least one illegitimate child. This not only affected his marital relations; it muddled future lines of succession.

But in 1509 these dark events were mostly in the future and Henry's good qualities – apart from his laziness – to the fore. The new king and queen got along

well, not least because she gave him his freedom. He spent most of his time “hanging out with the boys,” that is, his courtiers. He turned the Privy Chamber into a kind of gentleman’s club whose members spent their days and nights hunting, gaming, drinking, and occasionally whoring. This led one observer to remark in 1515 that the new king “is a youngling, who cares for nothing but girls and hunting and wastes his father’s patrimony.”¹³ All of which raises the question: “But who was running the country?”

The Great Cardinal

At first, Henry VIII was content to let his father’s old advisers govern from the council – the unfortunate Empson and Dudley excepted. But as they began to die off or retire, a new minister came to dominate: Thomas Wolsey, soon to be a cardinal and archbishop of York (1470/1–1530). Wolsey had started from humble beginnings, reputedly the son of a butcher from Ipswich, Suffolk. But he had managed to go to Oxford on a poor boy’s scholarship and his intelligence and capacity eventually landed him a place as a chaplain, first to the archbishop of Canterbury, then to Henry VII. He began the new reign as royal almoner, charged with distributing the king’s charity. Henry soon recognized that his almoner’s organizational abilities fitted him for something more ambitious. Wolsey managed Henry’s military campaigns in France in 1512–14 (see below) so successfully that the king rewarded him with an archbishopric in 1514. The pope bestowed on him a cardinal’s hat in the following year. Cardinal Wolsey was energetic, competent, and shrewd, yet one of the most hated men ever to hold high office in England. Why should this be so?

As a churchman, Wolsey was, first of all, a notorious pluralist; that is, he usually held several ecclesiastical positions at once. Thanks to the king’s favor he was named dean of Lincoln in 1509, bishop of Lincoln then archbishop of York in 1514, cardinal in 1515, abbot of St. Albans and bishop of Bath in 1518. In 1524 he exchanged the bishopric of Bath for the wealthier see of Durham; in 1529 he gave up Durham for the even more lucrative bishopric of Winchester – all of which he held simultaneously with that of York. Finally, from 1518 Wolsey was the pope’s personal representative, or *legate á latere*, in England. This accumulation of high Church offices meant, first of all, that Wolsey had a vast income. Bishoprics and abbacies had extensive estates attached to them, the money from which was at Wolsey’s disposal. Moreover, he sold subordinate Church offices, a practice condemned by the Church as simony. At the height of his power his income was something like £35,000 a year. This was a colossal sum. To put it in perspective, his nearest noble rival made, perhaps, £8,000 a year and the king himself had just over £90,000 per year in revenue with which to run his government!¹⁴ Wolsey loved to display his wealth: he ate well, dressed magnificently, processed through the streets of London pompously, and built two great palaces, York Place in London and Hampton Court up the Thames Valley, which outshone

anything in the king's possession. Wolsey was also a generous benefactor, founding Cardinal College, Oxford (now Christ Church), which was the largest and most lavishly funded academic establishment in England. Admittedly, as a cardinal, Wolsey was a prince of the Church: that is, he was expected to live in great state. His wealth and ostentatious display would not have been out of place in Renaissance Italy. But they *were* out of place in Renaissance England, and, for many observers, they did not sit well with the cardinal's priestly status or humble origins.

Perhaps even more astonishing – and infuriating – than the Great Cardinal's immense wealth was his neglect of pastoral duty and aggrandizement of place and power. Wolsey clearly could not be simultaneously resident in each of his sees, or personally serve the needs of their flocks, for they were widely scattered about the country and none of them was close to his usual residence, York Place in London. This offended churchmen who wanted reform. Nor could reformers have been pleased that Wolsey found positions within the Church for his own children – fathered, of course, out of wedlock and in violation of his vows of celibacy. By holding so many positions in the Church, he and his offspring kept other able men out of them. Above all, as papal legate, Wolsey virtually ran the Church of England. He felt little need to consult the pope, the king, or his fellow bishops. This ended up weakening the English Church on the eve of the Reformation by reducing both its contact with Rome and the size and experience of its leadership.

Wolsey monopolized civil as well as ecclesiastical office. He was, first, from 1515, lord chancellor of England, which made him the Crown's chief legal officer and the keeper of the Great Seal. This meant that the most important documents issued by the government, such as treaties, grants of land, and acts of parliament, could only be sealed with his cooperation. Since Wolsey's nominees also served as lord (keeper of the) Privy Seal and the king's private secretaries, virtually no document carrying royal authority could be issued without the cardinal knowing about it and, presumably, approving it. In other words, the king and his ministers, both major and minor, had to consult Wolsey before any policy could be undertaken, grant made or official installed. While the final decision on any matter of importance was always Henry's, the king's delegation of day-to-day and patronage decisions to the cardinal meant that those decisions were, often, foregone conclusions.

By aggrandizing so much influence with the king, Wolsey virtually destroyed the significance of the council as a source of advice. On the other hand, he increased the council's significance as an administrative and judicial body. He asked it to investigate the problems of illegal retaining, profiteering in the grain trade, enclosure, and vagrancy – thus provoking more aristocratic resentment from those who engaged in the first three. As lord chancellor, Wolsey presided over the courts of Chancery and Star Chamber. In fact, he was a fair and hard-working judge. He prided himself on rendering impartial justice to the poor, even against the king's own officials, and harangued the council on the need to enforce justice equitably. Wolsey ensured that these courts were no respecters of persons, ruling against even the most powerful in a way that lower courts might not dare.

But this, too, earned him no appreciation from the ruling class. Nor was he popular with the lawyers. Since litigants flocked to his courts for cases involving property, contract, perjury, libel, and forgery instead of to the court of Common Pleas or the ecclesiastical courts which normally had jurisdiction in such matters, officers of these courts resented the loss of jurisdiction and fees. Eventually, the cardinal's courts were overwhelmed with the amount of judicial business they attracted, forcing him to create a new tribunal rooted in the council called the Court of Requests.

Since most government officials were allowed to charge a fee for each piece of business that passed through their hands, Wolsey's engrossment of office was another source of his wealth. Though an impartial judge, the cardinal was thought to be a corrupt administrator, taking bribes, and selling civil as well as Church offices. In any case, his control of so many government offices and departments gave him vast patronage opportunities. As lord chancellor and the king's chief minister, Wolsey could influence the appointment of over half of the royal administration. So if you wanted an office, a pension, a favor – any of the goodies the Crown had to offer – you were best advised to go to York Place or Hampton Court, not to Richmond or Westminster Palace, and see the Great Cardinal first. To fail to do so, to offend the cardinal, was virtually to seal the doom of one's career. As a result, both God's Church and the king's government were full of Wolsey's nominees, working for the cardinal's interests as much as they did for either of those two superior beings. No wonder John Skelton (ca. 1460–1529) jibed:

The King's court
Should have the excellence
But Hampton Court
Hath the preeminence!

It will be recalled that Henry VII had been careful to limit the authority of his most important subjects and to ensure that *he* was the center of power, patronage, and attention. His son, preoccupied with youthful pleasure, was content to let Wolsey run things. This caused many to assume that the Great Cardinal was all powerful and his position unassailable. It is possible that Henry VIII actually encouraged these misconceptions, letting Wolsey take the blame for policies which had offended nearly every important group in the political elite. By attacking retaining, enclosure, and price-gouging on grain and providing justice for the poor, Wolsey offended the landed nobility and gentry. By attracting so much business to the courts over which he presided, he attacked the interests of the common and canon lawyers. And by dominating and exploiting the Church as he did, he alienated his fellow clergymen. As a result, for all his apparent power and wealth, the cardinal's only friend was the king. Presumably, Henry always knew this. He also knew what many of his courtiers, and perhaps Wolsey himself, may have forgotten: that he was still the king, and the Great Cardinal was powerful only so long as (1) Henry remained lazy and (2) the cardinal retained his confidence.

During the first two decades of the reign, Wolsey did so primarily through his conduct of war and diplomacy.

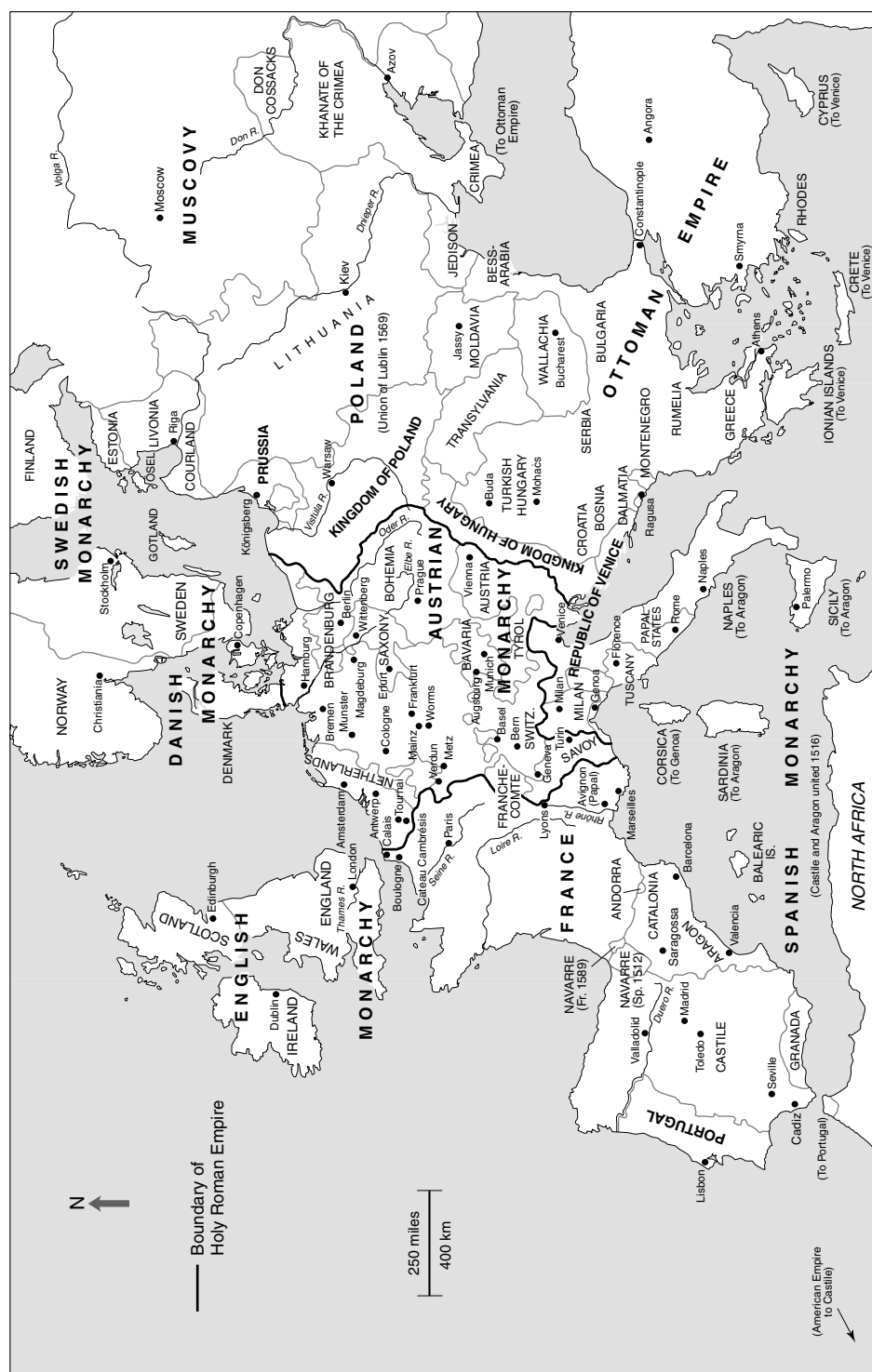
War and Diplomacy

For the first 20 years of the reign, neither Henry VIII nor Cardinal Wolsey seems to have been terribly interested in domestic policy. Rather, both concentrated on making a splash in European affairs. Henry VII had been content to make friends abroad, rattle the saber occasionally against potential enemies, and, for the most part, stay home. That may have been the less interesting course of action, but it was safer and cheaper. His son had different ideas. Why?

First, it must be recalled that, ever since the Norman Conquest, the “continental option” had been attractive to English rulers. Many English kings had sought adventure, glory, and a distraction from domestic disunity by pursuing continental ambitions. The English had, often in their past history, controlled territory in France. But following the débâcle of the Hundred Years’ War, that territory had shrunk to the port of Calais. Revival of England’s continental empire was naturally, nostalgically, attractive. Moreover, it could be argued that English involvement on the continent was natural for a European people.

More specifically, Henry VIII – young, dashing, chivalrous, and a fan of a previous “King Hal” (Henry V) – wanted his own measure of military glory and honor. As the reign of Henry V seemed to demonstrate, such adventure would also fulfill the ambitions and distract the attention of an aristocracy which had been oppressed and demoralized by his father’s policies. Henry VIII seems to have sympathized, issuing a general pardon and canceling over 45 recognizances during the first year of his reign. A chivalrous crusade against an ancient enemy such as France or Scotland might, if successful, go even farther to placate the grumbling nobility. Playing at tournaments with his nobles was not enough to fulfill this ambition. This latter-day King Hal needed a real war.

This is where the Great Cardinal came in. It will be recalled that Wolsey first came to royal attention by arranging and supplying Henry’s early military campaigns. He knew that, in order to maintain the king’s confidence, he would have to continue to fulfill royal desires by making Henry a major player in Europe, either through logistical support in war or through his diplomatic efforts. Moreover, many contemporaries believed that the Great Cardinal had an even higher ambition: to be the first English pope since the twelfth century, though historians now discount this.¹⁵ In any case, his attempt to become the arbiter of Europe was simply unrealistic. England was, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, a comparatively poor and militarily weak state, a relative midget hoping to tip the balance between two giants: a unified and wealthy France and the Holy Roman Empire, which comprised most of central Europe. After 1519, the emperor would also rule Spain and the Spanish Empire (see map 6). France’s population and royal revenue were both three times those of England; the emperor’s



population six and his revenue five times bigger than Henry's. Even if England had been wealthier and better mobilized, it was far away from the main theater of conflict between these two powers, for they were bickering over control of Italy. England might be a useful auxiliary partner to one side or the other but it was hardly likely to tip the balance or gain much land or glory for itself.

The result was a series of wars between France and the Empire in which England more or less tagged along. Those wars and the brief intervals of peace that punctuated them took place in four phases. The first phase, during which Henry and Wolsey's chances of success were brightest, lasted from 1511 to 1514. The king was young, his treasury full, and his confidence in his almoner great. All the other great powers were currently under the sway of old, cautious rulers of Henry VII's generation: Louis XII (1462–1515; reigned 1498–1515) in France; Maximilian I (1459–1519; reigned 1493–1519) in the Empire; and his nominal ally, Ferdinand in Spain. In 1511 Henry VIII joined with Spain, Venice, and the Swiss to form the Holy League, the purpose of which was to aid the pope in keeping the French out of Italy. The following year, Henry dispatched an army of 10,000 men to north-west Spain, but the cagey Ferdinand eventually made a separate peace with France. The English troops, left in the lurch by their allies, poorly supplied from England, reduced to starvation and mutiny, gradually slunk home without permission. In 1513 the emperor joined the Holy League and contributed 2,000 men. Henry offered 23,000 soldiers in return for the pope's secretly naming him king of France. In response, the French pressured the Scottish king, James IV, to break the Treaty of Perpetual Peace and invade England. Henry's force landed at Calais, marched south, captured the city of Tournai, and won a few skirmishes. This, combined with the crushing defeat of the Scottish army and death of James IV at Flodden, enabled Wolsey to engineer a favorable peace the following year. In fact, Henry could have taken Scotland; but he was more interested in France. The aged Louis XII married Henry's sister Mary Tudor (1496–1533), renewed his subsidy, and allowed the English to keep the territory they had captured. This was the high-water mark of English success on the continent for almost two centuries and it coincided with the elimination of the Scottish threat for a generation when the death of James IV brought the infant James V (1512–42; reigned 1513–42) to the throne.¹⁶ But Tournai was not much of a prize (which one can appreciate by locating it on the map) for the treasure spent to win it: Henry expended £650,000 on the 1513 campaigns alone, or six times his annual revenue! Thus, he had wiped out his father's financial nest-egg at one stroke. From this point on, Wolsey would have to raise money the old-fashioned way: through parliamentary votes or the solicitation of loans. Unfortunately, his unpopularity and inability to make domestic allies hindered these efforts. What little money was raised in future would often be spent foolishly on Swiss and Imperial mercenaries who failed to act.

Over the next five years (1515–20), the European situation changed dramatically. First, in 1515 Louis XII died and was succeeded by Francis I (1494–1547; reigned 1515–47). Francis was, like Henry, young, handsome, energetic, and ambitious for glory. In other words, the English king now had a personal rival who was backed by a much wealthier country than England. Francis immediately

displayed his aggressiveness by refusing Henry's request that he marry the widowed Princess Mary, and by supporting a Scottish rebellion against Henry's other sister, Margaret, who was now regent there. Wolsey attempted to preserve the peace – and render himself the arbiter of Europe – with a series of summits and agreements which culminated in the Treaty of London of 1518 and the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520. The former was a general European treaty involving all of the major powers and 20 lesser states in a promise to act collectively to preserve the peace. The latter was a summit between Henry and Francis, held on the border between English and French territory on the continent. It involved magnificent pageantry and pomp, fountains running with wine, tournaments, pledges of friendship, and even a wrestling match between the two kings – which, according to legend, Francis won.

The peace would not last. In 1519 the Holy Roman emperor, Maximilian I, died. He was succeeded by his grandson, Charles V (1500–58; reigned 1519–56). Because his other grandfather had been Ferdinand of Spain, the fortunate Charles ruled over most of central Europe, the Spanish Empire (where he was known as Charles I), Burgundy, the Netherlands, and Naples. Habsburg territories encircled France, whose rulers immediately felt threatened. On the surface, this seemed to be good news for England, but, in reality, the new emperor had little reason to be concerned about English interests.

England's relative powerlessness became clear between 1521 and 1525. In 1521 Henry allied with Charles V against France; subsequently, he hoped to cement the relationship by marrying his daughter, Mary (1516–58), to the emperor. Over the course of the next four years, an English army landed in France, burnt a few villages, threatened to march on Paris, ran out of money, and went home. The emperor's war was more successful: in 1525 his army crushed the French and captured Francis at the battle of Pavia in Italy. Henry saw this as his great opportunity. His plan was for Wolsey to raise some quick cash, secure the emperor's assistance by finalizing the marriage to Mary, invade France and seize Francis's throne. But Wolsey's tax plan, misnamed the "Amicable Grant," yielded revolts, not money, and was eventually withdrawn.¹⁷ Since Henry's cupboard was now bare, he could not provide a dowry for Mary, which deflated her attractions in Charles's eyes. Instead, the emperor married Isabella of Portugal (1503–39). This enraged the English king, but he was powerless to act.

Between 1525 and 1528 a diplomatic revolution took place. Henry and Wolsey, stung by Charles's indifference, extended feelers toward France. Eventually, they joined the League of Cognac against their former ally, Charles V. In fact, Henry soon had two gripes against Charles. First, the emperor continued to disregard English interests. Second, in the spring of 1527 Imperial forces sacked Rome and captured the pope. This was disastrous for Henry because he wanted something from the pope that the emperor did not want him to have: a divorce from Catherine of Aragon, who just happened to be Charles's aunt.

The next chapter will concentrate on the reasons for the king's desire and the implications of the pope's denial. In the meantime, Henry and Wolsey's continental adventures had produced four results, none of which was particularly

fortunate for England. First, they had drained the English treasury. Second, they had increased parliamentary and popular resentment of high taxes and the Great Cardinal who had levied them. Third, they had discredited Wolsey with the king. Finally and above all, they had proved that England was, in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, a second-rate power. The issues of royal finance, the role of Parliament, the power of royal favorites, and England's role in Europe would persist to the end of the period covered by this book. More immediately, their current disposition would affect profoundly the central problem of Henry VIII's reign, a problem which contemporaries called, euphemistically, the King's Great Matter.