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978-0-521-58376-3 - Francis Bacon: The History of the Reign of King Henry VII
and Selected Works

Edited by Brian Vickers

Excerpt

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To the
Most Illustrious and Most Excellent
CHARLES,
Prince of Wales, Duke of Cornwall, Earl of Chester,
etc.

It may please your Highness,

In part of my acknowledgement to your Highness, I have endeavoured to do honour to the memory of the last King of England that was ancestor to the King your father and yourself; and was that King to whom both Unions may in a sort refer: that of the Roses being in him consummate, and that of the Kingdoms by him begun. Besides, his times deserve it. For he was a wise man, and an excellent King; and yet the times were rough, and full of mutations and rare accidents. And it is with times as it is with ways. Some are more up-hill and down-hill, and some are more flat and plain; and the one is better for the liver,* and the other for the writer. I have not flattered him, but took him to life as well as I could, sitting so far off, and having no better light. It is true, your Highness hath a living pattern, incomparable, of the King your father. But it is not amiss for you also to see one of these ancient pieces. God preserve your Highness.

Your Highness's most humble
and devoted servant,
FRANCIS ST. ALBAN.

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[The Defeat of Richard III: Bosworth,
22 August 1485]

After that Richard, the third¹ of that name, king in fact* only, but tyrant both in title² and regiment*, and so commonly termed and reputed in all times since, was by the Divine Revenge, favouring the design of an exiled man, overthrown and slain at Bosworth Field; there succeeded in the kingdom the Earl of Richmond, thenceforth styled Henry the Seventh.³ The King immediately after the victory, as one that had been bred under a devout mother and was in his nature a great observer of religious forms, caused *Te Deum Laudamus* to be solemnly sung in the presence of the whole army upon the place, and was himself with general applause and great cries of joy, in a kind of militar* election or recognition, saluted King.⁴

Meanwhile the body of Richard after many indignities and reproaches (the diriges* and obsequies* of the common people towards tyrants) was obscurely buried. For though the King of his nobleness gave charge* unto the friars of Leicester⁵ to see an

¹ Richard Duke of Gloucester (1452–85), brother of Edward IV, second in line of accession, succeeded to the throne in 1483, having disposed of the legitimate heir; he was killed at the battle of Bosworth on 22 August 1485.

² parliament had been compelled to confirm Richard's title as King, illegally.

³ Henry Tudor Earl of Richmond (1457–1509) lived in exile in Brittany between 1471 and 1485, sheltered by Francis II, Duke of Brittany.

⁴ After the victory his soldiers acclaimed Henry King, and Lord Thomas Stanley placed on his head the 'crown' of Richard III, found among the battle spoils.

⁵ The order of Grey Friars (Market Bosworth is near Leicester).

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honourable interment to be given to it, yet the religious* people themselves (being not free from the humours* of the vulgar*) neglected it; wherein nevertheless they did not then incur any man's blame or censure. No man thinking any ignominy or contumely* unworthy of him, that had been the executioner of King Henry the Sixth (that innocent Prince) with his own hands; the contriver of the death of the Duke of Clarence, his brother; the murderer of his two nephews (one of them his lawful King in the present, and the other in the future, failing of him⁶); and vehemently suspected to have been the imposer of his wife,⁷ thereby to make vacant his bed for a marriage within the degrees forbidden.⁸ And although he were a Prince in militar virtue approved*, jealous of the honour of the English nation, and likewise a good law-maker for the ease and solace of the common people; yet his cruelties and parricides* in the opinion of all men weighed down his virtues and merits; and in the opinion of wise men, even those virtues themselves were conceived to be rather feigned and affected things to serve his ambition, than true qualities ingenerate* in his judgement or nature.

And therefore it was noted by men of great understanding (who seeing his after-acts looked back upon his former proceedings) that even in the time of King Edward his brother he was not without secret trains* and mines to turn envy* and hatred upon his brother's government; as having an expectation and a kind of divination that the King, by reason of his many disorders*, could not be of long life, but was like* to leave his sons of tender years; and then he knew well how easy a step it was from the place of a Protector* and first Prince of the blood to the Crown. And that out of this deep root of ambition it sprang, that as well at the treaty of peace that passed between Edward the Fourth and Lewis the Eleventh of France, concluded by interview of both Kings at Piqueny,⁹ as upon all other occasions, Richard, then Duke of Gloucester, stood ever upon the side of honour, raising his own reputation to the disadvan-

⁶ Should he die without issue.

⁷ For graphic accounts of these actual or suspected crimes see Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Bacon follows his main sources, Polydore Vergil and Speed, on Richard's evil character.

⁸ Kinship relations within which marriages are prohibited. Rumour had it that Richard wished to marry his niece Elizabeth, already betrothed to the future King Henry.

⁹ A treaty concluded at Picquigny, near Amiens, in 1475.

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tage of the King his brother, and drawing the eyes of all (especially of the nobles and soldiers) upon himself; as if the King by his voluptuous life and mean marriage¹⁰ were become effeminate, and less sensible* of honour and reason of state than was fit for a King. And as for the politic and wholesome laws which were enacted in his time, they were interpreted to be but the brocade* of an usurper, thereby to woo and win the hearts of the people, as being conscious to himself that the true obligations of sovereignty¹¹ in him failed and were wanting.

But King Henry, in the very entrance of his reign and the instant of time when the kingdom was cast into his arms, met with a point of great difficulty and knotty to solve, able to trouble and confound the wisest King in the newness of his estate; and so much the more, because it could not endure a deliberation*, but must be at once deliberated and determined.* There were fallen to his lot, and concurrent* in his person, three several* titles to the imperial crown. The first, the title of the Lady Elizabeth¹² with whom, by precedent pact¹³ with the party that brought him in,¹⁴ he was to marry. The second, the ancient and long disputed title (both by plea and arms)¹⁵ of the house of Lancaster, to which he was inheritor in his own person. The third, the title of the sword or conquest for that he came in by victory of battle, and that the king in possession was slain in the field. The first of these was fairest* and most like* to give contentment to the people, who by two-and-twenty years reign of King Edward the Fourth¹⁶ had been fully made capable* of the clearness* of the title of the White Rose or house of York; and by the mild and plausible* reign of the same King towards his latter

¹⁰ The King's wife, the widow of Sir John Grey, was not of noble blood.

¹¹ The true bonds which secure the obedience of subjects (a right to the throne).

¹² Elizabeth of York (1465–1503), eldest daughter of Edward IV.

¹³ Previous agreement: on Christmas Day 1483 Henry contracted to marry Elizabeth, at the urging of his moderate Yorkist supporters, some of whom expected him to rule by way of Elizabeth's right to the throne.

¹⁴ Helped him to power.

¹⁵ The *plea* argued on behalf of the Lancastrian line was that Edmund Earl of Lancaster ought to have succeeded Henry III in 1272, not Edward I, from whom Henry IV descended; the claim by arms was through the *de facto* Kings Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI. Henry VII, being descended from the Lancastrian John of Gaunt through the illegitimate Beauforts, had a dubious claim to the throne.

¹⁶ Edward (1442–83), elder son of Richard Duke of York, who had married Elizabeth Woodville, ruled from 1461 to 1483.

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time,¹⁷ were become affectionate* to that line.¹⁸ But then it lay plain before his eyes, that if he relied upon that title, he could be but a King at courtesy*, and have rather a matrimonial than a regal power; the right remaining in his Queen, upon whose decease, either with issue or without issue, he was to give place and be removed. And though he should obtain by parliament to be continued,¹⁹ yet he knew there was a very great difference between a King that holdeth his crown by a civil act of estates,²⁰ and one that holdeth it originally by the law of nature and descent of blood. Neither wanted there even at that time secret rumours and whisperings (which afterwards gathered strength and turned to great troubles) that the two young sons²¹ of King Edward the Fourth, or one of them (which were said to be destroyed in the Tower), were not indeed murdered but conveyed secretly away, and were yet living: which, if it had been true, had prevented the title of the Lady Elizabeth.²² On the other side, if he stood upon his own title of the house of Lancaster, inherent in his person, he knew it was a title condemned by parliament,²³ and generally prejudged* in the common opinion of the realm, and that it tended directly to the disinherison of the line of York, held then the indubiate* heirs of the crown. So that if he should have no issue by the Lady Elizabeth, which should be descendants of the double line, then the ancient flames of discord and intestine* wars, upon the competition of both houses, would again return and revive.

As for conquest, notwithstanding Sir William Stanley, after some acclamations of the soldiers in the field, had put a crown of ornament²⁴ (which Richard wore in the battle and was found amongst

¹⁷ Towards the end of his reign.

¹⁸ The house of York, accepted as legitimate sovereigns. But there is no contemporary evidence of opposition to Henry's legitimacy (Chrimes, *Henry VII*, p. 50).

¹⁹ Recognized as King during his lifetime.

²⁰ The three estates of the realm (Lords, Commons, and Convocation), hence 'a King by act of parliament'.

²¹ Edward V and Richard Duke of York.

²² Blocked: since their claim to the throne would have been prior to hers.

²³ In November 1461 parliament rejected the title of the house of Lancaster (and hence the two previous monarchs, Henry IV and Henry V) to the throne, allowing Henry VI to reign during his lifetime, to be succeeded by the house of York. But Richard Duke of Gloucester, having had Henry deposed and murdered, put his elder brother Edward IV on the throne.

²⁴ An ornamental crown (not the official one).

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the spoils*) upon King Henry's head, as if there were his chief title; yet he remembered well upon what conditions and agreements he was brought in; and that to claim as conqueror was to put as well his own party as the rest into terror and fear; as that which gave him power of disannulling* of laws, and disposing of men's fortunes and estates, and the like points of absolute power, being in themselves so harsh and odious, as that William himself, commonly called the Conqueror,²⁵ howsoever he used and exercised the power of a conqueror to reward his Normans, yet he forbore to use that claim in the beginning, but mixed it with a titular pretence,²⁶ grounded upon the will and designation of Edward the Confessor.²⁷

But the King, out of the greatness of his own mind, presently* cast the die,²⁸ and the inconveniences appearing unto him on all parts, and knowing there could not be any interreign or suspension of title, and preferring his affection to his own line and blood, and liking that title best which made him independent, and being in his nature and constitution of mind not very apprehensive* or forecasting of future events afar off, but an entertainer of fortune by the day,²⁹ resolved to rest upon the title of Lancaster as the main, and to use the other two, that of marriage and that of battle, but as supporters, the one to appease secret discontents, and the other to beat down open murmur and dispute; not forgetting that the same title of Lancaster had formerly maintained a possession of three descents³⁰ in the crown; and might have proved a perpetuity, had it not ended in the weakness and inability of the last prince. Whereupon the King presently* that very day, being the two and twentieth of August,³¹ assumed the style of King in his own name, without mention of the Lady Elizabeth³² at all, or any relation thereunto. In

²⁵ Duke William of Normandy, ruled 1066 to 1087.

²⁶ Pretended claim to rule by title.

²⁷ King of England 1042 to 1066.

²⁸ Took the decision ('die' is the singular form of 'dice').

²⁹ One who accepts the immediate situation and looks no farther. Bacon had diagnosed a lack of foresight as one of Henry's major weaknesses in his earlier sketch (below, p. 212). But see Introduction, pp. xxiv–xxvi.

³⁰ The Kings Henry IV, Henry V, Henry VI.

³¹ 1485. Writs were issued in Henry's name on 15 September to elect a parliament, and were accepted without demur (D. M. Loades, *Politics and the Nation 1450–1660. Obedience, Resistance and Public Order* (Brighton, 1974), p. 95).

³² (Whom he had agreed to marry.) Bacon emphasizes the King's ignoring his wife's claims, a detail not found in his sources, and disputed by modern historians.

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which course he ever after persisted: which did spin him a thread of many seditions* and troubles.

The King, full of these thoughts, before his departure from Leicester, despatched Sir Robert Willoughby to the castle of Sheriff-Hutton, in Yorkshire, where were kept in safe custody, by King Richard's commandment, both the Lady Elizabeth, daughter of King Edward, and Edward Plantagenet,³³ son and heir to George Duke of Clarence. This Edward was by the King's warrant* delivered from the constable of the castle to the hand of Sir Robert Willoughby; and by him with all safety and diligence conveyed to the Tower of London, where he was shut up close prisoner. Which act of the King's (being an act merely of policy* and power) proceeded not so much from any apprehension he had of Dr Shaw's tale³⁴ at Paul's Cross³⁵ for the bastarding of Edward the Fourth's issues, in which case this young gentleman was to succeed³⁶ (for that fable was ever* exploded*) but upon a settled disposition* to depress* all eminent persons of the line of York. Wherein still the King, out of strength of will or weakness of judgement, did use to shew a little more of the party³⁷ than of the King.

For the Lady Elizabeth, she received also a direction* to repair* with all convenient speed to London, and there to remain with the Queen Dowager her mother; which accordingly she soon after did, accompanied with many noblemen and ladies of honour. In the mean season* the King set forwards by easy journeys to the City of London, receiving the acclamations and applauses of the people as he went, which indeed were true and unfeigned, as might well appear in the very demonstrations and fulness of the cry. For they thought generally that he was a Prince as ordained and sent down from heaven to unite and put to an end the long dissensions of the two houses,³⁸ which although they had had, in the times of Henry

³³ Earl of Warwick, son of George Duke of Clarence (who had been fourth in line to the throne until the future Richard III had him murdered).

³⁴ A preacher hired by Richard to allege that Edward IV's children by Elizabeth Woodville were illegitimate, so establishing his own claim to the throne.

³⁵ Monument at the NE angle of the old St Paul's Cathedral, a pulpit at which many public sermons were preached and government proclamations read and exhibited.

³⁶ Would have been next heir to the throne.

³⁷ Partisan behaviour against the Yorkists; another emphasis added by Bacon. In fact, most of Henry's trusted administrators were Yorkists (Chrimes, *Henry VII*, pp. 101, 108, 158).

³⁸ Lancaster and York.