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and Selected Works

Edited by Brian Vickers

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HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT



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FRANCIS BACON

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*The History  
of the Reign of  
King Henry VII  
and Selected Works*

EDITED BY

BRIAN VICKERS

*Professor of English Literature and  
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## Editor's note

The aim of this edition is to make Bacon's *History of the Reign of King Henry VII* accessible to readers interested in the history of political thought who are not also expert in Jacobean English and Tudor history, economics, and politics. To give such readers as much help as possible I have written two sorts of footnote, one identifying the historical figures and political issues in Henry VII's reign, the other clarifying the meaning of Bacon's language. The linguistic difficulties that many modern readers experience with Bacon's English derive partly from the enormous changes that the language has undergone since his day, and partly from the technical vocabulary that he needed to use in describing Tudor social customs and legal practices. For the first, as I have shown in a recent anthology of his major English writings, his vocabulary remained to a surprising extent close to the original Latin sense of the anglicized words (*Francis Bacon* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 493–4). A glance at the glossary below under the headings 'casualties', 'corners', 'fact', 'futile', and 'strengthen' will illustrate this tendency. For the second, I have attempted to explain legal technicalities in the notes as briefly as possible, usually without citing modern authorities. Given the foreignness of much of this material, it seemed advisable to include longer explanations in the footnotes (where they are cued with a superscript number), shorter and frequently recurring ones in the glossary (where they are cued with an asterisk the first two or three times they occur). Footnotes are numbered by section in *Henry VII*, otherwise by text.

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*Editor's note*

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In the Introduction I have tried to sketch in the historiographical context within which Bacon was working, and to which he made such an original contribution. My debts to previous scholars are acknowledged in the notes and in the Select bibliography, but I want to thank, in addition, the series editors, Quentin Skinner and Raymond Geuss, for their helpful criticisms of the typescript, which made me address more clearly the interests of the series as a whole. Two other friends, both experienced students of Bacon's political and historical work, Stuart Clark and Markku Peltonen, also read the Introduction and offered valuable suggestions for improving it. Only I am responsible for any errors that remain.

My greatest thanks are due to my assistant for many years, Margrit Soland, for her long and sustained help in editing the text and preparing the glossary. The expertise which she acquired with word-processors, scanners, and software programmes, together with her great philological experience, made the editor's monotonous task a lot lighter. Her successor, Katherine Hahn, completed the manuscript with commendable efficiency and despatch. I should also like to thank Jean Field for her skilled copy-editing, which much improved the book's accuracy, and Margrit Soland for invaluable help with the proofs and index.

It gives me much pleasure to dedicate this book to Patrick Collinson, with gratitude for his remarkably illuminating sequence of books on the Elizabethan church and state, and with admiration for his untiring enthusiasm in encouraging and sustaining younger scholars. He seems to me to have followed that advice given by Alcuin to a bishop of Lindisfarne at the end of the eighth century: 'Never give up the study of letters, but have such young men with you as are always learning and who rejoice more in learning than in being drunk.'

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## Introduction

For to carry the mind in writing back into the past, and bring it into sympathy with antiquity; diligently to examine, freely and faithfully to report, and by the light of words to place as it were before the eyes, the revolutions of times, the characters of persons, the fluctuations of counsels, the courses of actions, the bottoms of pretences, and the secrets of governments; is a task of great labour and judgement. . . .<sup>1</sup>

## Composition and sources

In 1621 a concerted anti-government movement within parliament, directed against the growing corruption within James I's administration, claimed its most distinguished victim. Abandoned by James and Buckingham (the real targets of the upheaval), Francis Bacon, Lord Chancellor and head of the High Court of Chancery, was impeached on charges of having accepted gifts from suitors whose trials were still pending (a minor offence compared to the venality and corruption rife elsewhere in the Jacobean court). No evidence was ever produced that Bacon's judgements had been affected, indeed the charges against him were led by two suitors who were aggrieved that their gifts to the judge – a common practice in a society based on patron–client relations – had not produced verdicts

<sup>1</sup> *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, tr. Francis Headlam and James Spedding in J. S. Spedding, R. L. Ellis, and D. D. Heath (eds.), *The Works of Francis Bacon*, 14 vols. (London, 1857–74), iv.302. Further references to this edition will be incorporated into the text, in the form *S*, iv.302.

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in their favour.<sup>2</sup> By contemporary standards it was careless of Bacon (or his servants) to have accepted these gifts, but if James and Buckingham had not made him their scapegoat he could doubtless have defended himself by pointing to the corruption around him. Without their support he had no choice but to plead guilty and to be dismissed from his post.

The *History of the Reign of King Henry VII* was the first positive outcome of his public disgrace. Deprived of office, expelled from London, Bacon retired to his house in Gorhambury and produced the work between the end of June and the beginning of October 1621, a total of fourteen weeks' work at the most. Presenting the manuscript to James I on 8 October 1621, he compared his situation to that of London merchants who, on retiring from trade, 'lay forth my poor talent upon those things which may be perpetual' (S, xiv.303). James had apparently asked to see the book, and had read it by 7 January 1622, returning it to Bacon via Fulke Greville (Lord Brooke), 'commending it much to him'. The King called for some minor alterations, querying a few unusual 'words, as *epidemic*, and *mild* instead of *debonnaire*' (his servant Thomas Meautys reported), and marking for omission a short and possibly controversial passage concerning Members of parliament who had been impeached. James concluded his comments with the 'compliment that care should be taken by all means for good ink and paper to print it in; for that the book deserved it' (S, xiv.325–6). The book was published in March 1622, and dedicated to Prince Charles (p. 3 below).

That Bacon was able to write his *History* in so short a time is partly due to the fact that Henry VII's character and reign had occupied his thoughts for many years. He had described his project for writing a history of the Tudors in a letter to Lord Chancellor Ellesmere in 1605 (S, iii.249–52), and had written, perhaps at this time, a draft outline called 'The History of the Reign of K. Henry the Eighth, K. Edward, Q. Mary, and Part of the Reign of Q. Elizabeth' (pp. 209–14 below). Bacon loaned this piece to the historian John Speed, who quoted from it in his massive *Historie of*

<sup>2</sup> See Nieves Mathews, *Francis Bacon, The History of a Character Assassination* (New Haven and London, 1996), pp. 91–225, and Brian Vickers (ed.), *Francis Bacon* (Oxford, 1996; the Oxford Authors Series), pp. 695–702. Future references to this edition will be incorporated into the text, in the form *V*, 695–702.

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*Great Britaine* (1611), usually respectfully but sometimes differing in judgement. But Bacon's despatch in composing a *History* running to some 75,000 words in under four months was also due to the fact that he largely used printed sources. For earlier historians, such as Wilhelm Busch, this fact deprived Bacon's work of all originality. Today we can dismiss such judgements as anachronistic. As Stuart Clark has pointed out, the new analytical school of Renaissance historiography was concerned less with establishing new 'facts' about the past, based on first-hand research in archives, than with interpreting more cogently the facts already established.<sup>3</sup> Any innovation in method, we might say, can only go so far. It was a great break with the medieval chronicling mentality for Renaissance historians to lay such an emphasis on analysis, on relating cause and effect, on showing the interplay between personal disposition and public policy. The further realization that historiography depends on the accurate use of contemporary documents as the basis of interpretation was the discovery of a later age.

Yet, despite his critics' complaints, Bacon did use unpublished manuscript materials. In reconstructing the proclamation issued by Perkin Warbeck (pretender to the throne) on entering Northumberland in November 1495, Bacon noted in the margin of his text: 'The original of this proclamation remaineth with Sir Robert Cotton, a worthy preserver and treasurer of rare antiquities: from whose manuscripts I have had much light for the furnishing of this work' (p. 128 below, note 1). Sir Robert Cotton (1586–1631) was a distinguished collector of manuscripts (many of which came on the market after Henry VIII's Dissolution of the monasteries), whose library was already famous. In his notebook of 1608, the *Comentarius Solutus*, Bacon reminded himself: 'For precedents and antiquities to acquaint myself and take collections from Sir Robert Cotton' (S, xl.49). At some point between 1615 and 1623 Cotton loaned Bacon the MS of William Camden's *Annals of Queen Elizabeth* to read and criticize. Bacon returned it with a number of corrections and annotations, retrieved and reproduced by Spedding from the Cottonian MSS (S, vi.351–64). In 1621, when writing the *History*, Bacon was forbidden access to London, and some scholars have

<sup>3</sup> See the essay by Stuart Clark, 'Bacon's *Henry VII*: a case-study in the science of man', *History and Theory* 13 (1974), 97–118.

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seized on this fact to argue that he could not have used manuscript sources. However, a recently discovered letter to Bacon from John Selden, dated 20 August 1621,<sup>4</sup> proves that he was able to obtain copies through two intermediaries, both of whom became distinguished scholars. The first was John Borough, then one of Bacon's own secretaries, who rose from keeper of the Tower records to Garter King of Arms, and finally to principal herald under Charles I. The other was Selden himself, an outstanding figure in English jurisprudence, history, and scholarship, who records that he has 'transcribed faithfully' for Bacon several documents concerning Henry VII from records in the Tower and in the Crown office. (See another letter from Selden discussing further documents relating to the King: *S*, xiv.333–4.) Selden knew what he was talking about in 1622 when he wrote that, for the value of documentary evidence, only two works of British history, 'lately set forth by learned men of most excelling abilities', William Camden's *Annals of Queen Elizabeth* and Bacon's *History of the Reign of King Henry VII*, gave any idea 'either of the *Truth* or *Plenty* that may be gained from the Records of this kingdome'.

Bacon made use of this archival material for specifically documentary purposes, in order to verify details concerning statutes and parliamentary proceedings. For the main narrative of Henry's reign he relied on the major printed sources, beginning with Polydore Vergil's history – originally commissioned by Henry VII himself – the *Anglicae Historiae Libri XXVI*, first published in 1534 and reissued with an additional book (covering the period up to 1538) in 1555. Bacon sometimes used Vergil's text directly, sometimes as reworked by Edward Hall in *The Union of the Famous and Illustre Families of Lancastre and York* (1548), or by Speed. He also drew on less extensive sources, such as Robert Fabyan's *Chronicles* (1516), Sir Thomas More's *History of King Richard III* (1543), and two compilations on the life and reign of Henry VII by Bernard André. Bacon's debt to these sources is clearly visible; indeed, in some cases he accepted what we now know to have been errors, as with Vergil's

<sup>4</sup> See the essay by D. R. Woolf, 'John Seldon [*sic*], John Borough and Francis Bacon's *History of Henry VII*, 1621', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 47 (1984), 47–53. On the gradual use of archival material by English historians see F. S. Fussner, *The Historical Revolution. English Historical Writing and Thought 1580–1640* (London, 1962).

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account of the quarrels between England, Brittany, and France. Yet Bacon's handling of his sources is original and independent, amplifying some elements, playing down others. Stuart Clark concludes that hardly a passage in the *History* 'does not show Bacon's re-fashioning of Hall's narrative with the intention of displaying more adequately the circumstances, plans, and motives responsible for policies and action'; Judith Anderson judges that Bacon handles his sources with 'unintrusive art', synthesizing their often inchoate material into a coherent sequence, and bringing to bear on it 'the perceptions of an experienced lawyer and politician, and a shrewd observer of "human conduct"'.<sup>5</sup>

**Bacon's conception of history**

Unlike those Renaissance historians who subscribed to the traditional, providential concept of history, where events on earth reveal the justice of God's judgements, Bacon adopted the newer historiography of Machiavelli and Guicciardini, together with a classical model increasingly admired in the Renaissance, Tacitus. The Italian historians had broken with providential history, concerning themselves explicitly with the realm of second causes, that is, human affairs, and concentrating on political events.<sup>6</sup> Bacon, like them, believed that history was an important source of information and instruction but that its role should be descriptive, not prescriptive. In the *Advancement of Learning* (1605), discussing ethics, he emphasized that a knowledge of 'fraudulent and evil arts' was 'one of the best fortifications for honesty and virtue . . . So that we are much beholden to Machiavel and others, that write what men do and not what they ought to do. For it is not possible to join serpentine wisdom with the columbine innocency' – alluding to Christ's words, 'be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves'

<sup>5</sup> See Clark, 'Case-study', p. 102; Judith H. Anderson, *Biographical Truth. The Representation of Historical Persons in Tudor–Stuart Writing* (New Haven and London, 1984), pp. 171, 195–6. For further comment on Bacon's masterly re-shaping of his incoherent sources to form a thematically structured and fluent narrative see Jonathan Marwil, *The Trials of Counsel. Francis Bacon in 1621* (Detroit, Mich., 1976), pp. 165–72, and Fussner, *Historical Revolution*, pp. 264–5, 273–4.

<sup>6</sup> See, in the bibliography (§3), the studies by Fueter, Gilbert, Levy, and Wilcox.

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(Matt. 10: 16) – ‘except men know exactly all the conditions of the serpent’ (*V*, 217; *S*, III.430–1).<sup>7</sup>

The concern of the new historiography with human events and human causes had a distinguished predecessor in Tacitus, who, in the Prooemium to his *History*, had announced that he intended to concern himself ‘not only with the vicissitudes and the issues of events, which are often matters of chance, but also with their relations and their causes’. In the *Annals* Tacitus also expressed his interest in motivation, apologizing that where other histories were able to present a variety of matter, in his chosen subject ‘I have to present in succession the merciless biddings of a tyrant, incessant prosecutions, the ruin of innocence, the same causes issuing in the same results.’<sup>8</sup> In the great vogue for Tacitus which arose in the sixteenth century,<sup>9</sup> he became celebrated for his emphasis on hidden causes and secret motives. In his essay *How to Read History*, Caelio Curio (1503–69), a Piedmontese Protestant who became professor at Basle, wrote that Tacitus ‘was most diligent in explaining motives (*in consiliis explicandis*) and most penetrating in enquiring into causes; no one has seen more acutely or described more faithfully the arts of princes and of those around them’. Lipsius and Naudé described Tacitus as ‘skilled in revealing causes’, while Girolamo Canini (d.1626) praised Tacitus because ‘he represented to the life . . . not only outward actions . . . but also the most secret of thoughts’. In England, Henry Savile, translating the *History* and *Agricola* in 1591, similarly praised him for his knowledge of ‘counsails and causes’; Robert Johnson, three years later, also welcomed his giving ‘explanations discovering not only sequels but causes’.<sup>10</sup>

Bacon’s familiarity with these new emphases can be seen in his earliest works. In his *Advice to Fulke Greville on his Studies* (1599)

<sup>7</sup> For Bacon’s earlier discussion of this biblical text see the *Meditationes Sacrae* (1597), no. 3: ‘De Columbina Innocentia et Serpentina Prudentia’; *V*, 90–1; *S*, VII.234–5, 244–5.

<sup>8</sup> *History*, I.4, *Annals*, IV.33; tr. A. J. Church and W. J. Brodribb in *The Complete Works of Tacitus*, ed. Moses Hadas (New York, 1942), pp. 421, 163.

<sup>9</sup> See, in the bibliography (§2), the studies by Burke, Salmon, Benjamin, and Schellhase.

<sup>10</sup> Quotations from Peter Burke, ‘A survey of the popularity of ancient historians, 1450–1700’, *History and Theory* 5 (1966), 150–1, and Edwin B. Benjamin, ‘Bacon and Tacitus’, *Classical Philology* 60 (1965), 105, 103.



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Bacon wrote: 'Of all histories I think Tacitus simply the best' (*V*, 105; *S*, ix.25). In his *Letter of Advice to the Earl of Rutland on his Travels* (1596), Bacon defined three ways in which his addressee could excel in the *vita activa*, acquiring 'that civil knowledge, which will make you do well by yourself, and do good unto others . . . : by study, by conference, and by observation'. Under the first head Bacon advised, 'Above all other books be conversant in the Histories, for they will best instruct you in matter moral, military, and politic, by which and in which you must ripen and settle your judgement.'<sup>11</sup> Under the third he wrote, 'The use of observation is in noting the coherence of causes and effects, counsels and successes, and the proportion and likeness between nature and nature, force and force, action and action, state and state, time past and time present.' Bacon not only takes over the Tacitean concern with causes but reveals its philosophical underpinning by his immediately following reference to Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*: 'The philosopher did think that all knowledge doth much depend on the knowledge of causes; as he said, "id demum scimus cuius causam scimus".'<sup>12</sup> Bacon's mature theory of history reiterated his concern to discover causes. In the *Advancement of Learning* (1605) he distinguishes three main historical genres, of which the first is 'Memorials', that is, 'the first or rough draughts of history', consisting of 'Registers', or 'collections of public acts, as decrees of council, judicial proceedings', and so on, which lack 'a perfect continuance or contexture of the thread of narration', and 'Commentaries', which 'set down a continuance of the naked events and actions, without the motives or designs, the counsels, the speeches, the pretexts, the occasions, and other passages of action' which belong to a 'Just and Perfect History' – 'perfect' meaning 'complete' (*V*, 178–9; *S*, iii.333–4). In the *De augmentis scientiarum* (1623), the expanded Latin translation of the *Advancement of Learning*, in a passage probably written after he had finished *Henry VII*, and which may be taken as describing both his ideal and his own practice, he

<sup>11</sup> *V*, 73; *S*, ix.12–13. On Bacon's authorship of this letter see Vickers, *V*, 539–41, and 'The authenticity of Bacon's earliest writings', *Studies in Philology* 93 (1996): 248–96.

<sup>12</sup> *V*, 74–5; *S*, ix.14. The passage from Aristotle (*Anal. Post.*, i.2.71b 9ff) was rendered in the early Latin translations as 'tum scimus cum causam cognoscimus'.

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emphasized that ‘above all things (for this is the ornament and life of Civil History), I wish events to be coupled with their causes’ (S, IV.300–1).

Bacon also drew on Tacitus as the acknowledged authority on the arts of simulation and dissimulation, so brilliantly displayed by the emperor Tiberius. For Renaissance political theorists in the increasingly popular ‘reason-of-state’ tradition, the overriding political virtue was prudence, which they connected with an interest in *arcana imperii* (‘state secrets’) ascribed to Tacitus. The most striking link between Tacitism and the literature of dissimulation is found in the work of Tacitus’ greatest editor and commentator, Justus Lipsius, whose *Politicorum libri sex* (1589) distinguished ‘various kinds of dissimulation or deceit, “small”, “medium”, and “large” – advocating the first, tolerating the second, and condemning only the third’.<sup>13</sup> Bacon expresses a similar distinction in his Essay ‘Of Simulation and Dissimulation’ (below, pp. 226–7), which is also notable for several references to Tacitus. In that section of the *Advancement of Learning* dealing with ‘the architect of fortune, or the conduct of life’ (V, 272ff; S, III.154ff), quotations from Tacitus are used to illustrate ‘politic’ behaviour, while Bacon’s concluding assessment of Henry VII – his ‘Commemoration’ or obituary notice – includes some unmistakably Tacitean emphases on the King’s ‘closeness’ and ‘secrecy’ (below, pp. 199–200).

In his theory and practice of historiography Bacon was well aware of classical and Renaissance models, both for the form of history-writing and its substance. The form of *Henry VII* is annalistic, treating the King’s reign year by year, the method adopted by Livy, the most influential classical historian for the early Renaissance. Livy was followed by the first of the great Florentine humanist historians, Leonardo Bruni, while his successor Poggio preferred to imitate Sallust, who subordinated chronology to the discussion of broader themes. Guicciardini, in his *Storia d’Italia*, reverted to the annalistic form, which acts as a stabilizing element in his extremely complex narrative, with its bewilderingly frequent changes of place.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Peter Burke, ‘Tacitism, scepticism, and reason of state’, pp. 482, 485.

<sup>14</sup> See, in the bibliography (§3), the studies by Wilcox, Phillips, Luciani, and Cochrane.

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Bacon's model, however, was not Livy but Tacitus. In the *Advancement of Learning* he divides the third and major category of Civil History, 'perfect history', into Chronicles, Lives, and Narrations (see below, p. xx), with an afterthought:

There is yet another partition of history which Cornelius Tacitus maketh, which is not to be forgotten, specially with that application which he accoupleth it withal, Annals and Journals: appropriating to the former matters of estate, and to the latter acts and accidents of a meaner nature. (*V*, 178–83; *S*, III.333–8)

Bacon quotes a passage from the *Annals* (XIII.31) to define the substance of an annalistic approach, matters of state and 'great achievements'. As for its form, a few pages later Bacon again singles out Tacitus' *Annals* for praise as preserving the unity or 'harmony' of events:

For it is the harmony of philosophy in itself which giveth it light and credence; whereas if it be singled and broken it will seem more foreign and dissonant. For as when I read in Tacitus the actions of Nero or Claudius, with circumstances of times, inducements, and occasions, I find them not so strange; but when I read them in Suetonius Tranquillus gathered into titles and bundles, and not in order of time, they seem more monstrous and incredible. (*V*, 204–5; *S*, II.365–6)

Suetonius organized his *Lives of the Caesars* by topics, not chronologically, forfeiting Tacitus' ability to identify 'inducements', that is, the causes or circumstances leading to an event or action. Although Bacon adopts the annalistic framework for his *History of the Reign of King Henry VII*, marking off the separate years of Henry's reign, chronicling events within Britain and then recording parallel happenings in Europe, he freely rearranges the movements between home and abroad (as compared to Polydore Vergil, say) to produce a more unified structure. The Perkin Warbeck episode exemplifies this clarification of events and their interrelationships. 'Instead of following a strict chronological sequence Bacon allowed the demands of his argument to determine his discussion of particular points.'<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Fussner, *Historical Revolution*, p. 274.

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Bacon's other formal debt to classical and Renaissance histories concerned the insertion into the narrative of fully worked-out orations. The links between rhetoric and history were strong in both periods, the two disciplines sharing common goals, including the two relevant rhetorical genres, epideictic rhetoric (an ethical mode which represents virtue as admirable, vice despicable) and deliberative or political rhetoric (which concerns the expediency of a particular course of action). Classical historians, notably Thucydides and Livy, had freely invented speeches to express what an ambassador or a ruler would have said on a particular occasion, and their practice was emulated by Bruni, Poggio, and others. Sometimes historians used the 'dialogue oration', paired speeches by the two parties to a debate, which can be either complementary or contradictory. In the same way Bacon writes extensive speeches (set off in the early editions by being printed in larger type, and italics), for Henry's Chancellor, Archbishop Morton, propounding the King's explanation of 'the cause of Brittany to both houses' of parliament (pp. 49–54), for Henry himself, addressing both houses about his intention to invade France (pp. 82–4), and answering the Pope's commissioner (p. 167–8). Bacon also invents appropriately arrogant speeches for Perkin Warbeck (pp. 125–8; 129–32), and matching orations for the French and English ambassadors (pp. 73–8, 78–80).

Besides its annalistic structure, *Henry VII* combines two of Bacon's main categories for Civil History, namely Chronicles and Lives. Here Bacon seemingly wanted to overcome the disadvantages of concentrating either on 'a Time, or a Person', taken on their own:

Of these, although the first be the most complete and absolute kind of history and hath most estimation and glory, yet the second excelleth it in profit and use . . . For History of Times representeth the magnitude of actions and the public faces and deportments of persons, and passeth over in silence the smaller passages and motions of men and matters. But such being the workmanship of God as he doth hang the greatest weight upon the smallest wires, 'maxima e minimis suspendens', it comes therefore to pass, that such histories do rather set forth the pomp of business than the true and inward resorts thereof. But Lives, if they be well written, propounding to themselves a person to represent in whom actions both greater and smaller,

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public and private, have a commixture, must of necessity contain a more true, native, and lively representation. (*V*, 179–80; *S*, III.334)

*Henry VII* is both the history of a reign and the biography of a ruler, taking – so far as the available material allowed – the ‘smaller passages and motions of men’, those ‘true and inward resorts’ which are also linked with the bigger patterns, for here too, God ‘hangeth great weights upon small wires’ (below, p. 157). In his dedication to Prince Charles, Bacon wrote that in treating Henry ‘I have not flattered him, but took [portrayed] him to life as well as I could, sitting so far off, and having no better life’ (p. 3, below). Presenting a copy to Charles’s sister, Elizabeth, Queen of Bohemia, in April 1622, Bacon wrote: ‘If King Henry the Seventh were alive again, I hope verily he could not be so angry with me for not flattering him, as well-pleased in seeing himself so truly described in colours that will last and be believed’ (*S*, XIV.365). The repeated metaphor of himself as a portrait painter gives an important clue to Bacon’s conception of his role as historian. The King’s own person is to be the centre of interest, his portrait will not be idealized but true to life, credible even if critical.

Bacon’s history, while sharing the concerns of his models, Tacitus, Machiavelli, and Guicciardini to produce empirical observation and analysis of characters rather than moralizing or idealizing pictures, goes beyond those admired figures in relating history to his own specific concerns to unify knowledge. As some modern scholars have emphasized (best of all Stuart Clark<sup>16</sup>), Bacon explicitly declared in his most substantial philosophical work, the *Novum Organum*, that he gave history the same importance as ‘natural philosophy [and] the other sciences, logic, ethics, and politics’ in contributing to the unified study of human behaviour, the *Doctrina de homine* (*S*, IV.112). The *Essays* of 1612 and 1625, like the expanded sections of the *De augmentis* Books VII and VIII, were all fulfilments of Bacon’s call for an empirical and inductive study of the factors affecting human behaviour – age, health, environment, human dispositions, life-styles, heredity, fortune, and much else.<sup>17</sup> *Henry VII*

<sup>16</sup> See, in the bibliography (§6), the essays by Clark, Dean, and Nadel.

<sup>17</sup> See the essay by R. S. Crane, ‘The relation of Bacon’s *Essays* to his program for the advancement of learning’, in *Schelling Anniversary Papers* (New York, 1923), pp. 87–105.

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is a further contribution to the knowledge of ‘the different characters of natures and dispositions’, as called for in the *De augmentis* (Book VII, chapter iii), materials for which knowledge the student of moral philosophy can best derive from

the wiser sort of historians, not only from the commemorations which they commonly add on recording the deaths of illustrious persons, but much more from the entire body of history as often as such a person enters upon the stage; *for a character so worked into the narrative gives a better idea of the man than any formal criticism and review can*; such is that of Africanus and Cato the Elder in Livy, of Tiberius, and Claudius, and Nero in Tacitus, . . . and the Popes Leo and Clement in Francesco Guicciardini. For these writers, having the images of those persons whom they have selected to describe constantly before their eyes, hardly ever make mention of any of their actions without inserting something concerning their nature. (*S*, v.21; *my italics*)

A ‘full and careful treatise’ can be constructed out of such materials, Bacon adds, but it ought not to take the form of ‘complete individual portraits’. Rather, it should reproduce

the several features and simple lineaments of which they are composed, and by the various combinations and arrangements of which all characters whatever are made up, showing how many, and of what nature these are, and how connected and subordinate one to another; that so we may have a scientific and accurate dissection of minds and characters, and the secret dispositions of particular men may be revealed. (*S*, v.22)

Bacon’s account of Henry VII is an essay in this kind of psychological analysis, describing the King’s ‘nature’, drawing attention to the determining ‘features and lineaments’ in his character which help account for his actions.

Bacon was distinctive among English historians in emphasizing psychology as a key to understanding both the nature of man and political action, but he was also working in a tradition established by the Italian humanist historians, Bruni, Poggio, and della Scala, who all invoked psychological elements in order to explain the inner workings of historical phenomena and particularly of political institutions. Bacon’s probable model, however, was Guicciardini in his

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*Storia d'Italia*, for whom 'individual men remained the sole agents of historical change', and 'the ultimate causes of historical action were psychological. What happened in history, he assumed, was the result not immediately of the will of individual historical agents but of the particular combination of character traits that determined what these agents would will.'<sup>18</sup>

## Analysis and inference

Bacon's analysis of Henry VII is based on a similar conviction that character traits were independent of the will, for he can only make sense of the King's repeated behaviour patterns by postulating underlying psychological causes. Bacon used inference freely, attaching particular emphasis to three motifs in Henry's life, interpreted in psychological terms: the insecurity of the circumstances by which he acceded to the crown, which Bacon uses to explain Henry's general suspiciousness and rather unfriendly treatment of his Queen; Henry's variable performance in terms of the prudence or foresight necessary to a ruler; and his avarice.

Bacon lays great emphasis on the dubious nature of Henry's title to the throne, arguing that his victory at Bosworth carried more weight than his dynastic claims to the crown, being weaker than those of his Yorkist wife (pp. 7–12, 15, 20, 23). He also chronicles in some detail the sequence of rebellions and conspiracies fomented by the ousted Yorkists (pp. 20–2, 33–4, 60–2), the threat represented by the surviving Yorkist heirs, Warwick (pp. 10, 160–2) and the sons of John de la Pole (pp. 25, 30–5, 139, 168–9, 178–80, 189–90, 197). Bacon lavishes much attention and literary skill on the remarkable fact that Henry's reign was disturbed by two royal impostors, Lambert Simnel (pp. 22–36) and the more famous Perkin Warbeck<sup>19</sup> (pp. 95–115, 117–19, 124–32, 148–55, 159–62). Bacon several times records Henry's 'universal suspicion' (p. 27)

<sup>18</sup> Eric Cochrane, *Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago, 1982), p. 299. See also Donald J. Wilcox, *The Development of Florentine Humanist Historiography in the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), pp. 49–58, 134–8, 189–93, and Mark Phillips, *Francesco Guicciardini: The Historian's Craft* (Toronto and Buffalo, 1977), pp. 130, 139.

<sup>19</sup> See Brian Vickers, 'Bacon's use of theatrical imagery' in W. A. Sessions (ed.), *Francis Bacon's Legacy of Texts* (New York, 1990), and John Ford, *The Chronicle History of Perkin Warbeck: A Strange Truth* (1634).

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and lack of trust. This suspicion had relatively minor effects, such as when Henry's 'continual vigilance did suck in sometimes causeless suspicions which few else knew' (p. 34), but also more serious ones, as in 1488, when he 'was possessed with many secret fears touching his own people; which he was therefore loth to arm, and put weapons into their hands' (p. 43). As the most extreme state of distrust that Henry reached Bacon records 'a strange tradition that the King, lost in a wood of suspicions, and not knowing whom to trust', derived 'intelligence [from] the confessors and chaplains of divers great men; and for the better credit of his espials abroad with the contrary side, did use to have them cursed at Paul's (by name) amongst the bead-roll of the King's enemies' (p. 106). This is a device reminiscent of the counter-espionage practices of modern times, and in his concluding 'Commemoration' of the King (also printed in larger type, and italics) Bacon expresses his strong moral disapproval: to give spies 'credence by oaths or curses, that cannot be well maintained, for those are too holy vestments for a disguise' (p. 201). Bacon's psychological analysis concludes that this continuous insecurity adversely affected Henry's personality, making him 'a dark prince, and infinitely suspicious' (p. 202): 'He was indeed full of apprehensions and suspicions' (ibid.). The standard modern study agrees that 'The Problem of Security' was a major issue for Henry and that it undoubtedly helped form his suspicious nature.<sup>20</sup> However, it finds no hidden political motives in Henry's postponement of Elizabeth's coronation until after he had settled the Yorkist rebellion of 1487, nor does it endorse Bacon's account of Henry's coolness towards the Queen.

Having (rightly) diagnosed the King's suspiciousness in his political life, in the public sphere Bacon also attributed to him a lack of foresight at the beginning of his reign, 'being in his nature and constitution of mind not very apprehensive or forecasting of future events far off, but an entertainer of fortune by the day' (p. 9), a judgement repeated in his concluding assessment: 'His wisdom, by often evading from perils, was turned rather into a dexterity to deliver himself from dangers when they pressed him than into a providence to prevent and remove them afar off' (p. 203). Bacon then poses the question 'whether it were the shortness of his

<sup>20</sup> See the study by S. B. Chrimes, *Henry VII* (London, 1972), pp. 52, 68–94, 307–8.



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foresight, or the strength of his will, or the dazzling of his suspicions' that created 'the perpetual trouble of his fortunes', for these must have been caused by some defects 'in his nature, customs, and proceedings' (pp. 203–4) – like Guicciardini still, individual men and their psychological make-up are the main agents of historical change. Yet, on the other side, and far more often, he celebrates Henry as 'a wise and watchful King' (pp. 20, 28, 37, 180, 183), 'having the composition of a wise King, stout without and apprehensive within' (p. 24), 'both wise, stout, and fortunate' (p. 162). Bacon several times records the success of Henry's prudence in both domestic and foreign policy: 'These things he did wisely foresee, and did as artificially [skilfully] conduct, whereby all things fell into his lap as he desired' (p. 85), praising Henry as 'a prince of great and profound judgement' (pp. 21, 170), 'a prudent and courageous Prince' (pp. 42–3). Evaluating Henry according to the Renaissance virtue of *prudentia*, Bacon does not shrink from ascribing to him the arts of the politic Machiavellian, familiar to us from Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge plays. In dealing with Perkin Warbeck, Henry 'chose to work by countermine. His purposes were two; the one to lay open the abuse, the other to break the knot of the conspirators' (p. 103). He sent out 'secret and nimble scouts and spies', double-agents pretending to serve Warbeck but revealing their discoveries to him; 'others he employed . . . to be his pioners in the main countermine' (p. 105). Both groups were used 'to practise', 'to assail, sap, and work' into the secrets of Warbeck's supporters (pp. 105, 106). Bacon justifies Henry's use of 'secret spials', for 'he had such moles perpetually working and casting to undermine him' (p. 201), and he records the public and international esteem that Henry acquired by these methods. By 1495 the King 'was grown to such a height of reputation for cunning and policy that every accident and event that went well was laid and imputed to his foresight, as if he had set it before' (p. 118). By 1500 he 'had gotten such high estimation for his wisdom and sufficiency' (p. 168) that even his superficial acts were taken as profound, especially abroad, for ambassadors not only reported his 'wisdom and art of rule' to their kings but themselves continued to pass on information to him when they were recalled home, 'such a dexterity he had to impropriate to himself all foreign instruments' (p. 200). Since the most recent editor of *Henry VII* has accused Bacon of a major contradiction on

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this issue,<sup>21</sup> it is worth reiterating that Bacon registered a double verdict on Henry, as having both lacked prudence and (more often) displayed it. The best modern authority, S. B. Chrimes, arrived at a similarly divided judgement, finding the King both ‘essentially an opportunist’ who lacked foresight, and an astute diplomat, ‘cautious, prudent, patient’.<sup>22</sup>

The third psychological motif which Bacon identified, the King’s avariciousness, was something he had already diagnosed in his earlier sketch of Henry: ‘of nature he coveted to accumulate treasure’ (p. 213). Polydore Vergil had denounced the King’s greed as a major vice, but placed its onset late in the King’s reign, with his appointment of Empson and Dudley to the Council Learned in the Law. Subsequent historians (Hall, Holinshed) had played down this character trait, unsuitably inglorious for the ruler who had united the families of York and Lancaster. Bacon differed from all his predecessors in finding evidence of this vice throughout Henry’s career, not just with his new institution of the Council Learned in the Law. To begin with it took the legitimate form of raising money through parliament, but at his first mention of the King’s desire for ‘profit to his coffers, whereof from the very beginning he was not forgetful’, Bacon draws attention to the presence of greed in the king’s ‘nature’, judging that Henry ‘had been more happy at the latter end, if his early providence, which kept him from all necessity of exacting upon his people, could likewise have attempered his nature therein’ (p. 18). Henry’s raising of money through taxes passed by parliament (pp. 60, 121, 135) was legitimate, if unpopular; but he verged on the unconstitutional by reviving the euphemistically called ‘benevolences’, which Edward IV had used and Richard III abolished (pp. 85–6, 123, 130, 182). On a national scale, Bacon presents Henry as exploiting the sovereign’s right to raise money for wars, loyally granted by parliament (pp. 48, 55, 85, 135), with a main eye to profit: ‘which treasure, as a noise of war might draw forth, so a peace succeeding might coffer up’ (p. 48; also pp. 43, 135). Bacon then delivers the damning verdict that Henry used

<sup>21</sup> See the edition by J. Weinberger (Ithaca, N.Y. and London, 1996), pp. 9–16, 215–52. But another unsympathetic commentator has objected that Bacon departed from his sources precisely in order to emphasize the king’s prudence: Marwil, *Trials of Counsel*, pp. 174–8.

<sup>22</sup> Chrimes, *Henry VII*, pp. 219, 232, 272; and 287–8, 318.

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the threat of a war as a pretext for making money: 'he did but traffic with that war, to make his return in money' (p. 84, also pp. 78, 135), and even inserts into Perkin Warbeck's proclamation (against all the documentary evidence) the accusation that Henry had been 'making merchandise of the blood, estates, and fortunes of our peers and subjects by feigned wars and dishonourable peace, only to enrich his coffers' (p. 129).

In the private sector Bacon shows the King exploiting his legitimate royal rights to the full by raising money through confiscating the land and property of disloyal subjects (pp. 18, 29, 112). But Henry went much further than any English king before him, breaking all canons of law and decency by his ruthless use of quasi-legal processes against wealthy subjects. Already in 1494, Bacon judges, there 'began to be discovered in the King that disposition which afterwards, nourished and whet on by bad counsellors and ministers, proved the blot of his times: which was the course he took to crush treasure out of his subjects' purses by forfeitures upon penal laws' (pp. 116–17 and note 5). The case of Sir William Capel, Alderman of London, condemned for a huge sum of money, did cause 'men [to] startle the more at this time, because it appeared plainly to be in the King's nature, and not out of his necessity, he being now in float for treasure', having just 'received the peace-money from France, the benevolence-money from his subjects, and great casualties [windfalls] upon the confiscations' (p. 117). This 'disposition' of his 'nature', this psychological trait which made the King so unpopular among his subjects (pp. 178, 198–9, 202), was given full encouragement by his 'two instruments, Empson and Dudley, whom the people esteemed as his horse-leeches and shearers' (pp. 174–5).

Henry made these two trusted servants – lawyers, privy councillors, each in turn speaker of the House of Commons – the leading figures in an institution he set up, the 'Council Learned in the Law', which had a dual function, to try certain Crown prosecutions and to collect Crown debts. Being outside the common law courts, this body could prosecute at will, issue fines, using the threat of the Privy Seal, and put anyone who resisted into prison for long periods, without trial. Bacon's analysis of all the legal tricks, subterfuges, and bare-faced flouting of justice practised by these two corrupt lawyers (pp. 174–8), is much more detailed than that of any

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previous historian, assuming a knowledge of legal procedures that few modern readers possess. Bacon writes with the professional interest of a lawyer, but also with the growing indignation of any right-minded person at the grotesque abuse of office by these 'two persons, [who] turned law and justice into wormwood and rapine', with all the many 'courses, fitter to be buried than repeated, they had of preying upon the people' like 'hawks'. Bacon's sources for legal and parliamentary matters in Henry's reign include the Law Reports and the Statutes of the Realm, but on this matter he must have had access to a manuscript from the King's household accounts (perhaps through the good offices of Sir Robert Cotton), for he records 'to have seen long since a book of accounts of Empson's, that had the King's hand almost to every leaf by way of signing, and was in some places postilled in the margent with the King's hand likewise' (p. 178). It is only relatively recently that historians have come across these account-books from the Household Chamber, which indeed have the King's annotations on every page.

Bacon's originality in making Henry's avarice a leading psychological motif in his public policies, at home and abroad, disputed by some later writers, has been vindicated by modern historians.<sup>23</sup> We now know that Henry was the first English ruler to descend to the roles of accountant and debt-collector himself, personally instigating many of the prosecutions in order to raise money. Henry also ruthlessly exploited legal institutions, such as attainder (processes against subjects suspected of high treason, whose land and property were forfeited, and not always returned when the attainder was reversed), the royal right to profits from wardships and marriages, and the imposing of bonds and obligations on rich men (by which most of the peerage were forced to fulfil certain undertakings on pain of forfeiting large sums of money). The gradual recovery and editing of manuscript material concerning the royal finances has confirmed Bacon's account of the injustices perpetrated and documented many of which he could not have known. His account of Henry's final 'great remorse [at] the oppressions of Dudley and Empson' is borne out by some clauses in the King's

<sup>23</sup> See, in the bibliography (§4), the studies by Chrimes, Guy, and Lander. Weinberger, in his recent edition (p. 186n), apparently ignorant of recent historical research, denies the accuracy of Bacon's account.

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will (p. 194 and note 13), as we now know, and it has received poignant confirmation in a remarkable document, only published in 1972. In 1489 Dudley, imprisoned in the Tower and awaiting execution (he and Empson were accused of treason and executed by Henry VIII as a sop to public indignation), set down from memory eighty-four cases of unjust exactions which he had made on behalf of Henry, in the hope that he could bring ‘help and relief for the dead King’s soul’.<sup>24</sup> Modern scholars agree with Bacon that rapacity undoubtedly caused Henry’s unjust financial policies, together with the other psychological trait which Bacon identified, the King’s inherited insecurity.

Bacon’s originality, compared to previous historians of Henry VII, lay primarily in his coherent interpretation of the King’s politics in terms of his psychological make-up. Two other personal emphases concern parliament and the law. Bacon gave parliament considerable prominence in his narrative, all the more remarkable given that Henry VII’s parliaments are the least documented of any since the reign of Edward III: ‘whereas the reports of Hall and Speed would together barely fill a page, more than fifteen percent of Bacon’s text is devoted to parliamentary activities’.<sup>25</sup> Bacon’s object was evidently to show contemporary readers how a parliament should be conducted, and his emphasis occasionally resulted in anachronisms, such as interpreting the *De facto* act in seventeenth-century terms, and attributing too great an importance to statute-making in the period preceding the major Tudor reforms.<sup>26</sup> Bacon’s interest in parliamentary proceedings reflected his own experience, covering forty years in both houses, and was intended to demonstrate the place of practical politics in government.

Even more pronounced, again without any precedent in previous historians, was the attention Bacon gave to the laws passed in parliament, which are always commented on (pp. 15, 17, 53, 86, 119), and sometimes discussed in great detail (pp. 56–60, 64–9, 121–4, 197–8). Bacon praises Henry for cultivating ‘the lasting fruit of parliament, which is good and wholesome laws, . . . [which] yet continue to this day’ (p. 56). Among the ‘excellent laws’ that Henry made Bacon singles out those which addressed not just the peace of

<sup>24</sup> From Dudley’s confession, found in Chrimes, *Henry VII*, p. 311.

<sup>25</sup> Marwil, *Trials of Counsel*, p. 179.

<sup>26</sup> Fussner, *Historical Revolution*, pp. 271–2.

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the realm but the well-being of 'private houses and families', such as an 'excellent moral law' against the abduction of heiresses, a 'charitable law for the admission of poor suitors' (legal aid, as we would call it), 'good and politic laws . . . against usury', laws designed to correct the depopulation caused by enclosure, statutes to make justices of the peace perform their duties properly, and various reforms of criminal justice. In his comments on these legal issues Bacon reveals his own life-long concern for justice and equity, which can be seen in his many proposals for legal reform during thirty years of his professional career as a lawyer.<sup>27</sup> But while apologizing for this 'long insisting upon the laws that were made in this King's reign', partly 'because it hath some correspondence to my person', he states that he has done so in order to remedy the 'defect even in the best writers of history, that they do not often enough summarily deliver and set down the most memorable laws that passed in the times whereof they write, being indeed the principal acts of peace. For though they may be had in original books of law themselves; yet that informeth not the judgement of kings and counsellors and persons of estate so well as to see them described and entered in the table and portrait of the times' (pp. 68–9). And in the amount of personal research Bacon performed in the legal records – documentary evidence not used by any previous historian of that reign – he fulfils one function of the historian well appreciated in modern times, to investigate the social and political significance of legal systems. It may be, as some commentators object, that he overestimated Henry's excellence by hailing him as 'the best lawgiver to this nation after King Edward the First' (p. 64), but he left his readers in no doubt as to the important duty of the monarch, together with parliament, to constantly scrutinize and improve the laws of the realm. In praising Henry VII, the ancestor of James I, and in dedicating this book to the future King Charles I, Bacon was fulfilling the duty of a counsellor to give his sovereign good advice on governing the country.

In summary, Bacon's *History* fulfils the criteria that he laid down, combining a narrative of a complete sequence of events with a psychological analysis of the motivations lying behind political decisions. The emphasis throughout is on the ruler rather than the

<sup>27</sup> See Daniel R. Coquillette, *Francis Bacon* (Edinburgh, 1992).