CHAPTER I

BEGINNING OF THE REIGN, AND RISE OF WOLSEY

The Rose both White and Rede
In one Rose now dothe grow;
Thus thorow every stede¹
Thereof the fame doth blow:
Grace the seed did sow:
England, now gaddir flowris,
Exclude now all dolours.

So ran the first verse of the poem in which Henry VIII was welcomed to the throne by his old tutor. Skelton continued with joyful prophecies, not all of which came quite true: he concluded with one which will hardly be disputed (though even he did not mean it to be quite so prophetic as it appears to modern eyes):

Upon vs he doth reigne,
That makith our hartis glad,
As king most soueraine
That ever England had...²

Lord Herbert of Cherbury, writing a century and a quarter later, after beginning his Life and Raigne of King Henry the eighth with a statement of the difficulty of “that Princes History, of whom no one thing may constantly be affirmed”, was rash enough three pages later to speak of him as “having more undoubted right to the Crown by the union of the White Rose and the Red in his person than any King ever delivered unto us by warrantable History”. The generality of this assertion may be deemed a little excessive: yet it is difficult to find many of his predecessors who came to the throne with so good a right and with so

¹ I.e. place. The poem is printed on pp. ix ff., vol. 1, of A. Dyce’s edition of Skelton’s Poetical Works.
² My italics.
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*Dynastic Advantages*

universal and natural an acceptance as Henry, and certainly he made in this respect a striking contrast with the last seven, even with the last nine, of the kings of England.

This strength of title was a principal factor in the reign, all the more because though it was so extremely remarkable yet it was not absolutely secure. Henry, for all the ease of his succession, for all that he was both white rose and red, knew nevertheless that the natural mode of revolution remained dynastic, that the possession of the crown was not yet quite beyond challenge, and still less the transmission of it.

Towards the end of Henry VII’s reign Sir Hugh Conway, treasurer at Calais, in conversation with the deputy and the master porter there, related how he had happened not long since, when the king was lying sick at Wanstead, to be amongst many great personages, the which fell in communication of the king’s grace and of the world that should be after him if his grace happened to depart”. Then he said that some of them spake of my lord of Buckingham, saying that he was a noble man and would be a royal ruler. Others there were that spake, he said, in like wise of your traitor Edmund de la Pole, but none of them, he said, that spake of my lord prince. The deputy and the porter were horrified, and hoped that Conway had reported the matter to the king: he had not, he said, and moreover “since my coming [here] I have showed the same to Sir Nicolas Vaux, lieutenant of Guînes, and to Sir Anthony Browne, lieutenant of the castle here, and they answered me both this, that they had two good holds to resort unto, the which, they said, should be sure to make their peace, how soever the world turn”. Then his listeners all said he was the more to blame to keep such matters from his highness, but he replied that once or twice before he had given similar information to the king, and had got nothing by it but grudging and suspicion. It is to be observed not only that the succession was still very far from being a matter of course, but also that the possession of material force (as a castle and garrison, for instance) was still the best of all assets in politics.

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1 The incident survives in the deposition of Flamank, the deputy’s servant, which is not dated: it happened towards the end of September, probably in 1503. Flamank’s deposition is on p. 231, vol.1, of J. Gairdner’s *L. and P. of Richard III and Henry VII.*

2 This was probably in December 1499: cf. *L. and P. Henry VII*, i, p. 239.
Personal Advantages

Whether or not Henry VIII remembered this story, he certainly remembered what lay behind it: so it was that in 1513 he executed Edmund de la Pole, in 1521 Edward Stafford duke of Buckingham, in 1538 Henry Pole and Henry Courtenay, and in 1541 Margaret countess of Salisbury. The long period covered by these executions shows sufficiently that it was not only the transmission, it was also the possession, of the crown which Henry was unable to treat as a matter of course.

Nevertheless, he was more nearly able to do so than any one for a very long time, and this is of primary importance for the history of his government, both as a source of strength to Henry and as a basis for the continuous and orderly development of institutions and of their relations to each other. Along with this advantage Henry had in the highest degree the personal advantages which a new king is seldom quite without. He was young, he liked being agreeable, he was handsome, intelligent, skilled alike in the athletic and in the intellectual exercises which were then fashionable, fond of the sort of display which then gave pleasure, pious and gay, apt for the admiration alike of plain Englishmen and of foreign ambassadors and scholars.

...our natural, young, lusty, and courageous prince and sovereign lord, King Harry the Eighth, entering into the flower of pleasant youth, had taken upon him the regal sceptre and the imperial diadem of this fertile and plentiful realm of England, which at that time flourished in all abundance of wealth and riches, whereof he was inestimably garnished and furnished, called then the golden world, such grace of plenty reigned then within this realm.

1 Son of Edward IV’s sister, Elizabeth.
2 His father was descended from Edward III’s son, Thomas of Woodstock: his mother was sister of Edward IV’s queen, Elizabeth: he married a daughter of the earl of Northumberland, and his children married Ursula, daughter of Margaret countess of Salisbury, Thomas Howard duke of Norfolk, Ralph Neville earl of Westmorland, and George Neville lord Abergavenny. Cf. below, p. 308.
3 Son of Margaret countess of Salisbury.
4 Son of Edward V’s sister, Katherine.
5 Daughter of Edward IV’s brother, George duke of Clarence.
6 And remember the execution of Thos. Howard earl of Surrey in 1546, cf. P. 540 below.
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Inherited Fortune

So wrote George Cavendish in 1557, and this praise of the time gone by owed less than usual to the enchantments of distance. Henry was as acceptable to his kingdom as a lover to his mistress.

The new king was well supplied with more material advantages also: he inherited from his father a treasure in money and things easily convertible into money such as no other English king ever had, and other treasures hardly less unparalleled and if less easily negotiable for that very reason less likely to be evanescent—lands wider than ever and better exploited, a society in which both wealth and order were increased and increasing, and in which the rising class was naturally sympathetic with the monarchy, a church habitually complacent to royal utilisation of its revenues, a strict alliance with the richest of neighbouring powers and a tradition, which did not prove difficult to maintain, of levying contributions on the next richest. Besides all this, Henry was given by his first parliament tonnage and poundage for life and an annual grant of nearly £20,000 for his household.

The young king was able, then, to gratify his people with the pageantry and magnificence which he and they loved, and for the first part of his reign, until a whole new set of circumstances had arisen, to manage his affairs with only very occasional recourse to subsidies voted by commons and convocation. The prosperity of his finances permitted him also to confer some positive benefits. Upon various pretexts his father had bound in recognisances, bonds to pay fines, such persons as by legal violence or subtility could be brought within danger of the law. Now great numbers of these recognisances were cancelled on the ground that they had been made “without any cause reasonable or lawful, by the undue means of certain of the learned Council of our late father, contrary to the law, reason, and good conscience, to the manifest charge and peril of the soul of our late father, and also that the sums of money contained in the said recognisances cannot be levied without the evident peril of our late father’s soul, which we would for no earthly riches see nor suffer”.

1 *Life of Wolsey* (Dent’s edn.), p. 12.
2 Spain.
3 France.
5 *L. and P. Henry VIII*, 1, old edn. no. 1004, new 448 (4), quoted by Brewer, 1, p. 69.
Empson and Dudley

So the new reign was doing very well out of the old one, not only inheriting its accumulation of prestige, power, and wealth, but also acquiring merit by ostentatiously disapproving its misdeeds. This disapproval went beyond mere administrative reversal and extended to the punishment of the agents of extortion and to the legislative restriction of their opportunities for the future.

Empson and Dudley had been principally employed in the business of extortion, and they were now to be its scapegoats. Complaints poured in against them, and they were summoned before the council, which committed them to the Tower in spite of their plea that they had only obeyed the king’s commands by putting into execution laws “in open Parliament decreed,... if this be a crime, why do you not first repeal your proper Acts?” ¹

If such arguments did not help Empson and Dudley, nevertheless the legal reality which they represented could not be neglected; perhaps the two officials had not always kept within the law in their financial expedients, but they were not proceeded against on that ground, and instead, “new and strange crimes were found and objected against them”, as that “their intent was to seize upon the person of the new King, and so to assume the sole government, or... to destroy him. Of which crimes, how improbable soever”, they “were found guilty by their Juries, and both condemned of Treason, and so remanded to the Tower”. ² These condemnations were not considered enough, and when parliament met in January 1510 Empson and Dudley were attainted.³ For some time their execution was deferred, but finally in August the resentment of the feudal class was satisfied, and they were beheaded. At the same time statute made the fiscal abuse of penal laws in future less likely by limiting suits for penalties to the lapse of three years.⁴

¹ Herbert of Cherbury, Henry VIII, p. 5. Proper=own.
² Herbert, pp. 9, 10.
³ Exactly how, it is difficult to guess, and probably the bill of attainer was never completed: on the third day before the end of the parliament a bill was read twice in the lords (L.J. i, p. 7); next day a third time; next day recepta...noviter formata, approved and sent to the commons with at least one provisio and one additio; no act appears on the parliament roll. H. L. Gray, Influence of the Commons on Early Legislation, p. 16, n. 4, adds, reasonably, “The entries for the last two days are somewhat confused, indicating a rush of business”. ⁴ ¹ H. VIII c. 4.
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The Dudley Incident Characteristic

In the whole incident there was more than one trait which was to prove characteristic of the policy of Henry VIII. Henry was as fully determined as ever his father had been that ministers were to be absolutely responsible to him, rewarded or punished as they suited the royal will, but he was willing that unpopularity incurred by the royal administration should be neutralised, when it attained an inconvenient activity, by the king’s abandonment of his agents to vengeance. Further, he disliked as much as any ruler the hampering of administration by legality or by abstract justice, but he was aware of the advantages to government of legal formalities and perhaps not capable of doubting that what he wanted could be got from the law: accordingly, Empson and Dudley were given indictments and trials as full of legality as they were void of justice, and their blood was put upon the head not only of the jury but also of the grand inquest of the nation, the whole body of England gathered in parliament. It is not necessary to believe that this policy was already consciously thought out and adopted, but it is useful to notice that from the very beginning it was being followed.

When Henry dropped, or rather threw to the wolves, two of his father’s councillors, it was in the exercise of his own judgment and not at all by way of admission of any right anywhere but in himself to control the appointment or conduct of his advisers. His councillors continued to be much the same as those employed by his father towards the end of his reign.¹ These were the councillors who might be consulted on important political questions, and of them perhaps not more than half a dozen really mattered. There were also other councillors,² as there had been under Henry VII, experts in administration or in law of one sort or another, but these were mere experts, servants, rather than ministers. Some of the habitual councillors held no office, and some great officers were not of the council. None of them had any right to be consulted, nor all of them together a right to decide. They were left to manage business as long as it did not interest the king, but when there were big decisions to be taken he took them, with as much or as little help as he desired. From the first Henry made it clear how

¹ Cf. below, p. 7.
Early Councillors

personal he meant his royalty to be, how little at the disposal of his councilors: in August 1509 Andrea Badoer reported to the Venetian government how an ambassador had come from France to confirm the peace, in response to Henry’s letters asking Lewis to be his friend, and how Henry turned to his people and said “Who wrote this letter? I ask peace of the King of France, who daren’t look at me, let alone make war!” 1 Yet clearly the king’s councillors must always be important to foreign powers, and particularly when the king is new and young. At first ambassadors tended to treat the councillors as not less important than the king, 2 but they were pretty early aware that these councillors were not unanimous, that it was the king's acceptance which gave predominance to a party or effect to a programme. 3

The councilors Henry began with were naturally those his father had left him, 4 his grandmother being, apparently, one of the most important at first, 5 and after the Aragon marriage Ferdinand perhaps the most influential, as he was the most persistent. There were wild rumours, as that Buckingham should be protector and Northumberland rule the north, 6 and those who hoped for great changes enjoyed telling office-holders that their tenure ended with the death of the grantor. But public business soon settled in the course in which Henry VII had set it, all the treaties made by him were confirmed, and his old councillor, Richard Fox bishop of Winchester and lord privy seal, remained the principal minister, with others of the old councilors, Warham, 7 Surrey, 8

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2 L. and P. I (edn. 1920), nos. 383, 401, 421, 476, 734, 793, 943, 1475, 1484, 1916, 1999, 2208, 2209. In Jan. 1511 D’Arizolles negotiated with king and council, and they knew the usefulness of associating with themselves parliament, for as to Lewis XII’s suggestion of a council called by the pope, “they will summon a meeting of the substantial men of this kingdom to deliberate upon the answer to be made”, L. and P. I (edn. 1920), no. 674.
3 Cf. nos. 476, 1201.
4 For the first sixteen years Henry continued to use his father’s effigy on his coins, so medieval was his government and so unpretentious his personality sometimes and in some respects. Edward VI was during part of his reign to issue coins actually in his father’s name: G. C. Brooke, English Coins, pp. 175, 180, and cf. p. 72 below.
5 A. F. Pollard, Wolsey, p. 13, and cf. L. and P. I (1920), no. 82 (2), her part in fixing coronation ceremonies and expenses.
7 Chancellor, and archbishop of Canterbury.
8 Treasurer.
and Ruthal, three or four more lords and another bishop or two, seven or eight official knights and half a dozen lawyers.

That this continuity did not spring from any bureaucratic indispensability or aristocratic exigence was clearly and swiftly demonstrated by the career of Thomas Wolsey. Henry’s father had made him his chaplain, and tried him out as a diplomat. In November 1509 he became Henry’s almoner. Perhaps he owed his first steps in the new king’s favour to Fox and Lovel, fortifying themselves against Surrey and Shrewsbury. By the spring of 1511 a word from Wolsey was enough to short-circuit the whole official machinery of administration, so that the chancellor gave effect, without any intervention of secretary or privy seal or master of the rolls, to a signed bill handed to him by Wolsey with an assertion that the king wished it specially expedited.

By the autumn of that year he was clearly a politician important in his own right and a very influential councillor: he could, indeed, still, 30 Sept. 1511, write to Fox with a formal submission (“Your lordship, I trust, is nothing discontent with that I presumed to break your instructions”), but with a just confidence in the importance of his own opinions on matters of high politics—the papal election and English influence on it, the mistakes of Ruthal and Herbert, Surrey’s lapse from favour, and how with a little pushing it might be made permanent. By the end of 1511 Wolsey had been taken into council and was influential enough to

1 Secretary, and bishop of Durham.
2 E.g. Shrewsbury and Herbert.
3 E.g. Poynings and Lovel.
9 Wolsey was telling Henry it was important the new pope should be under obligation to him.
10 Chamberlain, an illegitimate sprig of the Beaufort stock, later earl of Worcester.
12 In Jan. 1512 he was one of the seven who signed the dinner costs of the lords and others of the king’s council since 11 Nov. 1511: L. and P. 1 (edn. 1920), no. 1247.
be reputed the principal author of the French war,¹ and in the following
year (and the year after that, which brought the victories of Thérouanne
and Flodden) he was certainly the principal manager of it.² Wolsey’s
eminence had destroyed any chance that Henry’s councillors might be
compelled or enabled by the necessity of action and Henry’s inexpert-
ness to take on a corporate and organic unity, under the management,
for instance, of Fox. And indeed, the orders of the council, “pretty
frequent at the commencement of the reign”, tended to “diminish in
number in proportion as events became important”.³

It was in 1511 that Wolsey began to be a figure of first-rate political
importance, and by 1512 he was the chief man in England after the
king. From then can be dated with certainty the king’s effective control
of all policy. A boy of eighteen, as Henry was at his accession, and
more than normally fond of tennis and shooting, dancing and feasting
(besides music and theology), could not have much taste or capacity
for public business: it is just for this reason that the rise of Wolsey
marks so clearly the completeness with which the control of policy and
administration was in royal hands. For the truth of this proposition
it does not matter whether the thinking mind in what may be called
the Wolsey period was Wolsey’s or Henry’s. In either case it was the
royal choice which raised the minister to power and which kept him
there: the minister was well aware of this, and knew also that he was
chosen for his personal and not for any official or feudal or factious
qualifications, that he had none of that strength of indispensability
which earlier and later ministers have had because they brought to the
service of the crown ecclesiastical or territorial or parliamentary re-
sources which the crown could neither do without nor secure but by
their mediation: Wolsey was more powerful than Dunstan or the duke
of Newcastle, than the earl of Warwick or Sir Robert Cecil, more
powerful against all the world except the king, because he had all the

¹ Brewer, I, p. 18, referring to L. and P. I, nos. 3356, 3451 (new edn. 1327, 1422): n.b. decisions taken by the council with the English army in Spain. It was on
13 Nov. 1511 that Henry joined the Holy League.
² Cf. e.g. A. F. Pollard, Wolsey, p. 18 and Henry VIII, pp. 56–61, and references
to L. and P. At the end of 1511 Badoer had thought all the council except two
suborned by France, L. and P. I (edn. 1920), no. 998.
³ Brewer, I, p. 53.
Wolsey’s position Personal

king’s favour: but all his power came from that one source. It was the king’s favour, however obtained, that mattered; it was essential and it was by itself sufficient. It did not need even to be solidified into office in order to confer political power. Wolsey might be only the king’s almoner, but because it was known that he had the king’s confidence he had authority enough to design, create, and manage a great armament. Since 1512 he had been the most important subject in England, by 1514 he was the most conspicuous as well. By that time also Henry was out of humour with his allies and out of love with war: diplomacy had become the chief business of the reign, a business in which Wolsey was already displaying unrivalled talents. In 1513 he had become bishop of Tournay, early in 1514 bishop of Lincoln and later that year archbishop of York. By then Henry was begging Leo X to make him a cardinal, “with all the honours held by” Bainbridge;1 “such are his merits”, wrote the king, “that I esteem him above my dearest friends, and can do nothing of importance without him”.2 After a good deal of difficulty Henry was successful, and in September 1515 Wolsey became cardinal of St Cecilia: in December he was made lord chancellor.3

His self-confidence easily kept pace with his elevation: “the Pope”, he told his vicar-general at Tournay, where he was troubled by a previously elected French claimant, “would not offend me for one thousand such as the elect is”.4 Not only did he seem to the Venetian ambassador in London “to have the management of the whole of this kingdom”5 and “to have been the author of the peace” with France, but he himself felt sure enough of his own position, and of Henry’s attitude, to tell Giustinian that as he was “the author of the peace”,

1 Recently deceased archbishop of York.
2 L. and P. I (edn. 1920), no. 3140: Wolsey was already angling at Rome for a cardinalate (l, no. 2932, 21 May 1514) and for a legateship (Wolsey, p. 23). No. 2942, he became Chancellor of Cambridge University.
3 Cf. Inst. Hist. Res. Bul. vii (A. F. Pollard), p. 88, Wolsey’s appointment for life by letters patent (cf. L. and P. iv, no. 15, Jan. 1524, Wolsey’s “legateship, with all faculties, for life, which was never heard of before”): p. 97, Henry may have known nothing of the patent, Wolsey’s fall the end of any attempt at a “medieval” or “French” chancellorship.
4 L. and P. I, no. 5698 old edn., 3546 new.
5 Rawdon Brown, Four Years at the Court of Henry VIII, I, p. 110 (6 July 1515).