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978-0-521-42039-6 - Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship

John Watts

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Henry VI (1422–61) was one of the most spectacularly inadequate kings of England, and his reign dissolved into the conflict known as the Wars of the Roses; yet he held on to his throne for thirty-nine years and, for almost thirty of them, without much difficulty. What was the nature of Henry's inadequacy, and why did it have such ambivalent and complicated results?

This book offers a re-evaluation of politics and government during Henry's reign by looking more clearly at the scheme of values, expectations and practices which shaped the relations of king and nobility during the period. Since the 1970s most histories of fifteenth-century England have focused on the individual interests and private connections of politicians as a means of making sense of politics. By contrast, this work argues that we can understand what happened in Henry VI's reign only if we look at common interests and public connections as well, and that the best way to examine these is by looking at contemporary political ideas and their expression in the language of politics and the institutions of government. For Henry's subjects, it is the problem of establishing royal authority which emerges as paramount, with the supposedly factious and 'overmighty' nobility appearing as doomed but devoted servants of the state.

'... historians will find in this well-written and stimulating book an essential guide to the politics of Henry VI's court'. Simon Walker in *The Times Literary Supplement*

'... the most original study of the reign of Henry VI to have appeared for a long time, striking out for a fresh interpretation of its troubles... This is an important book, incorporating highly intelligent historical thinking which promises to throw new light on other English reigns besides that of Henry VI.' M. H. Keen in *Nottingham Medieval Studies*

John Watts is Lecturer in History, University of Oxford, and Fellow of Corpus Christi College

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521420396](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521420396)

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First published 1996

First paperback edition 1999

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Watts, John.

Henry VI and the politics of kingship / John Lovett Watts.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 42039 3 (hardback)

1. Great Britain – Politics and government – 1399–1485. 2. Great Britain – History – Henry VI, 1422–1461. 3. Great Britain – Kings and rulers – Biography. 4. Henry VI, King of England, 1421–1471. 5. Monarchy – Great Britain – History. I. Title.

DA257.W38 1996

320.942'09'024–dc20 95–38634 CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-42039-6 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-65393-0 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2008

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For  
Mandy, Liz and Grattan,  
and  
in memory of Katie

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## PREFACE

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I ALWAYS USED TO snigger at the self-deprecating prefaces which fifteenth-century authors attached to their poems and other writings. I did not realise until I was well under way with this book that the strongest impulse I would feel at this time would be to offer an apology – an apology that my work is not more exhaustively researched, better organised, more carefully thought-out, more clearly expressed and so on. There have been many times when I have thought seriously about abandoning altogether the scheme of publishing this revised version of my PhD thesis: now that government-inspired changes to the system of research funding have made such reticence impossible, I sincerely hope that this book is not one more thing to be alleged against them. It has been quite a long time in the making, and in that time the debates of historians of the fifteenth century – if not always their written words – have moved on a certain amount. Even so, I think that there is still room for a re-evaluation of our assumptions about the operation of fifteenth-century government and, indeed, for an attempt to apply the insights gained in the process to the muddled reign of Henry VI. I should stress, perhaps, that what follows *is* an attempt, an experiment. I think that, on the whole, I am asking the right questions, but it is difficult to be supremely confident about many of the answers. This is primarily a work of interpretation and discussion rather than a definitive summation of research: it does not begin to approach the range and depth of new information about the reign which Ralph Griffiths provided for us in his monograph of fifteen years ago; and one or two of its conclusions may already have been challenged in two doctoral theses which emerged while I was working on the book, and which I deliberately did not read, in order to leave their authors to publish their findings for themselves.<sup>1</sup> In the end, if my

<sup>1</sup> These are Kate Selway, 'The Religious Life and Religious Patronage of Henry VI and his Circle', Oxford, 1994, and Helen Castor, 'The Duchy of Lancaster in the Lancastrian Polity, 1399-1461', Cambridge, 1993.



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treatment interests people and moves them to think more generally about how we should approach the politics of fifteenth-century England, it will have achieved a large part of its purpose.

Over the course of the last nine years, I have notched up a huge number of academic debts, which it is a pleasure to acknowledge, if not to repay. I owe a great deal of my understanding of later medieval England to those who taught and studied with me at Cambridge: to Christine Carpenter, who supervised me as an undergraduate and then again as a research student; to Ted Powell and Rosemary Horrox, whose lectures I attended and who talked with me about many issues of fifteenth-century history, both then and since; and finally to numerous contemporaries of mine – above all, perhaps, Shelley Lockwood, Benjamin Thompson, Helen Castor, Mike Braddick and Julian Turner, the last of whom gave me a striking sense of how intellectually inspiring research into the political history of later medieval England could be. During my time in Cambridge and subsequently, I have also received advice, help and (often) correction from many other scholars. Among these, I am especially grateful to the following: Gerald Harriss, with whom I have discussed quite a few of my ideas, and who, besides helping me with a number of documentary questions, has kindly read and commented upon several papers and articles which I have written – his criticisms have been extremely pertinent and I have learned from them; Barrie Dobson and Rees Davies, who examined my PhD and made a large number of valuable observations both at the time and since; Margaret Condon, who has discussed the king's council with me on several occasions; Michael K. Jones, who has told me a lot about the war in France and given freely of his views on the aims and activities of the Beaufort brothers; Steve Gunn, who got me to think twice about many of my assumptions about the later fifteenth century; Christopher Brooke, who drew my attention to a number of errors I had made, and forced me to think hard about my views on the foundation of Eton and King's; Mark Ormrod, who talked with me about counsel in the reign of Edward III; Cliff Davies, whose kindness and whose advice on a whole range of topics have been vastly helpful. Several of these people have also read drafts of sections and chapters of the present book – indeed, the last-named found the time to plough through the first five chapters and to reassure me at one of my lowest of low moments: I am exceedingly grateful to him and to others who have looked over my work for me; I could not have finished it without their help and encouragement.

I should also like to record my thanks to a number of institutions. I am grateful to the Master and Fellows of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, for giving me every assistance, including a handsome amount of

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financial support, during the preparation of my thesis; and also to the Warden and Fellows of Merton College, Oxford, for electing me to a Junior Research Fellowship, and providing such a stimulating and yet amiable environment for continuing my work. I am most honoured to have been appointed to a junior lectureship in the Department of History and Welsh History here at Aberystwyth. My colleagues have been a great source of friendship and intellectual support, and it has been a particular pleasure to work in such close proximity to Rees Davies, whose unfailing kindness and excellent advice have been an enormous help in bringing this work to its conclusion. Like most students of history, I have relied heavily on the good will and assistance of members of staff in libraries and record offices: it has invariably been forthcoming, but, in particular, I should like to thank the officers in the Round Room at Chancery Lane, for innumerable bits of information and advice. Finally, I should like to thank the staff of Cambridge University Press, and, in particular, Bill Davies, who has listened patiently to three years' worth of excuses and apologies and gently edged me onwards to the finish.

Last of all: how can I thank Christine Carpenter enough? Having been my teacher and friend for over a decade, she has encouraged, cajoled, provoked and inspired me through every academic project I have tackled. I often feel that I owe almost everything to her support, both intellectual and personal: certainly, whatever credit this book deserves is due, above all, to her. For its weaknesses and errors, of course, no one but myself can be held responsible.

## PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

The decision to issue a paperback edition of this book has enabled me to correct typographical slips and errors of fact, and to make various small stylistic improvements to the text. I am most grateful to Christine Carpenter and Simon Payling for drawing some of these to my attention, and to Cambridge University Press for allowing me to make corrections. At Simon's suggestion, I have also taken the opportunity to expand the index slightly, so as to include references to certain courtiers and members of the gentry who were left out of the original. For remaining mistakes, I can only apologise.

ABBREVIATIONS

‘Active Policy’	‘The Active Policy of a Prince’ in M. Bateson (ed.), <i>George Ashby’s Poems</i> , EETS, extra ser., no. 76, (London, 1899), pp. 12–41.
<i>Aquinas</i>	A. P. D’Entreves (ed.), <i>Aquinas: Selected Political Writings</i> (Oxford, 1959).
Basin, <i>Histoire</i>	C. Samaran (ed.), <i>Thomas Basin. Histoire de Charles VII</i> , 2 vols. (Paris, 1933–44).
‘Benet’s Chron.’	G. L. and M. A. Harriss (eds.), ‘John Benet’s Chronicle for the Years 1400–62’, <i>Camden Miscellany XXIV</i> , 4th ser., IX (London, 1972), pp. 151–233.
BL	British Library.
<i>Brut</i>	F. W. D. Brie (ed.), <i>The Brut, or The Chronicles of England</i> , 2 vols., EETS, orig. ser., nos. 131, 136 (London, 1906–8): all references are to vol. II.
<i>CAD</i>	<i>A Descriptive Catalogue of Ancient Deeds</i> . . . , 6 vols., HMSO (London, 1890–1915).
<i>CChR</i>	<i>Calendar of the Charter Rolls</i> .
<i>CClR</i>	<i>Calendar of the Close Rolls</i> .
<i>CFR</i>	<i>Calendar of the Fine Rolls</i> .
<i>Chrons. of London</i>	C. L. Kingsford (ed.), <i>Chronicles of London</i> (Oxford, 1905).
<i>CIPM</i>	<i>Calendarium Inquisitionum Post Mortem</i> .
<i>CMH</i>	<i>Cambridge Medieval History</i> .
<i>Collections</i>	J. Gairdner (ed.), <i>The Historical Collections of a Citizen of London</i> , Camden Soc., new ser., XVII (London, 1876).
<i>CPL</i>	<i>Calendar of . . . Papal Letters</i> .
<i>CPR</i>	<i>Calendar of the Patent Rolls</i> .

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<i>Crowland</i>	H. T. Riley (ed.), <i>Ingulph. Chronicle of the Abbey of Crowland</i> (London, 1854).
<i>CSP Milan</i>	<i>Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts ... of Milan.</i>
<i>CSP Venice</i>	<i>Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts ... of Venice.</i>
<i>De Laudibus</i>	S. B. Chrimes (ed.), <i>Sir John Fortescue: De Laudibus Legum Anglie</i> (Cambridge, 1942).
<i>De Natura</i>	<i>De Natura Legis Naturae</i> , transl. in T. Fortescue, Lord Clermont (ed.), <i>Sir John Fortescue, Knight, his Life, Works and Family History</i> , 2 vols. (London, 1869), I, pp. 187–333.
d’Escouchy, <i>Chronique</i>	G. L. E. du F. de Beaucourt (ed.), <i>Chronique de Mathieu d’Escouchy</i> , 3 vols. (Paris, 1863–4): all references are to vol. I.
de Waurin, <i>Croniques</i>	W. and E. L. C. P. Hardy (eds.), <i>Recueil des Croniques et Aunchiennes Istories de la Grant Bretagne ... par Jehan de Waurin</i> , 5 vols., Rolls ser., (London, 1864–91).
DKR	<i>Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records.</i>
EETS	Early English Text Society.
EHD	<i>English Historical Documents.</i>
EHL	C. L. Kingsford (ed.), <i>English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century</i> (Oxford, 1913).
<i>English Chron.</i>	J. S. Davies (ed.), <i>An English Chronicle ...</i> , Camden Soc., old ser., LXIV (London, 1856).
<i>Feudal Aids</i>	<i>Inquisitions and Assessments relating to Feudal Aids</i> , 6 vols., HMSO (London, 1899–1920).
<i>Foedera</i>	T. Rymer (ed.), <i>Foedera, Conventiones, Literae ...</i> , 3rd edn, 10 vols. (The Hague, 1745).
<i>GEC</i>	G. E. Cokayne, <i>The Complete Peerage</i> , ed. H. V. Gibbs, et al., 13 vols. (London, 1910–40).
Giles, <i>Chronicon</i>	J. A. Giles (ed.), <i>Incerti Scriptoris Chronicon Angliae ...</i> , (London, 1848): all references are to pt IV.
<i>Governance</i>	C. Plummer (ed.), <i>The Governance of England ... by Sir John Fortescue, Knight</i> (Oxford, 1885).

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<i>Great Chron.</i>	A. H. Thomas and I. D. Thornley (eds.), <i>The Great Chronicle of London</i> (London, 1938).
<i>HBC</i>	E. B. Fryde, et al. (eds.), <i>Handbook of British Chronology</i> , 3rd edn (London, 1986).
<i>HMC</i>	<i>Historical Manuscripts Commission</i> .
Leland, <i>De Rebus</i>	J. Leland, <i>De Rebus Britannicis Collectanea</i> , ed. T. Hearne, 6 vols. (London, 1770): all references are to vol. I, pt II.
<i>Letters and Papers</i>	J. Stevenson (ed.), <i>Letters and Papers Illustrative of the Wars of the English in France during the Reign of Henry VI</i> , 2 vols. in 3, Rolls ser. (London, 1861–4).
<i>Letters of Margaret</i>	C. Monro (ed.), <i>Letters of Queen Margaret of Anjou</i> . . . , Camden Soc., old ser., no. LXXXVI (London, 1863).
<i>Livre du Corps de Policie</i>	D. Bornstein (ed.), <i>The Middle English Translation of Christine de Pisan's Livre du Corps de Policie</i> (Heidelberg, 1977).
<i>Loci e Libro</i>	J. E. T. Rogers (ed.), <i>Thomas Gascoigne. Loci e Libro Veritatum</i> (Oxford, 1881).
<i>PL</i>	J. Gairdner (ed.), <i>The Paston Letters</i> , Library edn, 6 vols. (London, 1904).
<i>Plumpton</i>	T. Stapleton (ed.), <i>Plumpton Correspondence</i> , Camden Soc., old ser., IV (London, 1839).
<i>PPC</i>	N. H. Nicolas (ed.), <i>Proceedings and Ordinances of the Privy Council of England</i> , 7 vols., Record Com. (London, 1834–7).
<i>Regement</i>	F. J. Furnivall (ed.), <i>Hoccleve's Works</i> , iii. <i>The Regement of Princes</i> , EETS, extra ser., no. 72, (London, 1897).
<i>Registrum Whethamstede</i>	Riley, H. T. (ed.), <i>Registrum Abbatiae Johannis Whethamstede</i> , 2 vols., Rolls ser. (London, 1872–3).
<i>RP</i>	<i>Rotuli Parliamentorum</i> , 6 vols., Record Com. (n.p., n.d.).
<i>Secreta</i>	R. R. Steele, (ed.), <i>Three Prose Versions of the Secreta Secretorum</i> , EETS, extra ser., no. 74, (London, 1898).
'Somnium'	'Somnium Vigilantis', printed by J. P. Gilson as 'A Defence of the Proscription of the Yorkists in 1459', <i>English Historical Review</i> , 26 (1911), pp. 512–25.

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<i>Stonor</i>	C. L. Kingsford (ed.), <i>The Stonor Letters and Papers</i> , 2 vols., Camden Soc., 3rd ser., XXIX–XXX (London, 1919).
<i>Three Chrons.</i>	J. Gairdner (ed.), <i>Three Fifteenth-Century Chronicles</i> , Camden Soc., new ser., XXVIII (London, 1880).
‘Three Consideracions’	‘The III Consideracions Right Necesserye to the Good Governauce of a Prince’, in Genet (ed.), <i>Political Tracts</i> , pp. 180–219.
<i>Town Chrons.</i>	R. Flenley (ed.), <i>Six Town Chronicles of England</i> (Oxford, 1911).
‘Tractatus’	‘Tractatus de Regimine Principum ad Regem Henricum Sextum’, in Genet (ed.), <i>Political Tracts</i> , pp. 53–168.
<i>VCH</i>	<i>Victoria History of the Counties of England.</i>