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The question of authority

When Henry VII won the Battle of Bosworth in 1485, there was no outstanding evidence that this victory was more than the latest turn in fortune in the series of skirmishes and slaughters that had characterised the Wars of the Roses and had, indeed, affected politics for the best part of a century. The crown had repeatedly changed hands and it might well do so again. There were plenty of candidates to dispute Henry's tenuous hold upon it.

Where monarchy, the greatest authority in the land, had faltered and might well falter again, the absence of the 'king's peace' had thrown both local authority and private, informal authority into turmoil. However, as the Tudor monarchs sought to establish themselves and regain royal authority, so the scope for government to impose its peace locally in the shires and also to interfere in private family relationships, in sex and in religion might also become extended. These opening chapters will first look at the state of formal authority in England in the late-fifteenth century, and then examine the local and personal inter-relationships that characterised respect, order and hierarchy at ground level.

Ultimately, authority in a formal sense in late-medieval England derived from king, church and nobility. There was, by 1485, a distinct loosening of the bonds of Christendom with the pope's formal authority at its head, as kings and countries sought to redefine their relationship with the papacy and define and extend their regional privileges. There had already been some significant redrawing of the lines between papal and kingly authority in France, Spain and England. Even greater upheavals in the relationships between Rome and the German and English princes were about to happen.

In England, however, it is possible to go back to the end of the fourteenth century and, like William Shakespeare, draw attention to a crucial moment when the natural order of things was thrown out of kilter. Shakespeare's works so often centre on a first act where the natural order is upset, followed by three further acts in which all hell is let loose pending the reconciliations and restoration of order in Act five. It is, therefore, interesting to consider Shakespeare's history plays from *Richard II* on. They tell us a great deal about the 'natural order', about the expectations of Shakespeare's audience regarding lawful authority, and about the Tudors' attempts to establish themselves securely on the throne.

In these plays, Richard II is usurped by Henry IV. The latter establishes himself and agonises as to whether his adult heir, Henry V, will prove a fit king for England. Henry V rejects Falstaff and becomes an English hero. Yet he dies young and without an adult heir. The unfortunate Henry VI is thus doomed to the

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horrors of regency and civil strife. Edward IV proves every inch a king, yet also dies without an adult male heir. The princes are murdered in the Tower and the 'unnatural' Richard III reigns briefly and calamitously until the natural order can be restored with Henry VII. He duly produces order from chaos and provides England with the adult and glorious Henry VIII.

Shakespeare wisely spared us Edward VI or Mary, or even Gloriana and, like us, he is analysing the fifteenth century with the benefit of hindsight. Yet his play cycle tells us much about the Tudor predicament and about what the public, such as it was, wanted and expected from authority.

The king's peace

Fundamentally, the phrase 'the king's peace' tells us a great deal about the expectations of subjects regarding rulers. Ultimately, royal authority was expected to fulfil two functions. These were to establish the kind of basic law and order at home that would enable English men and women to sleep in their hovels without serious danger of robbery, rapine, fire and sword from villains, vagabonds and other disturbers of the king's peace and to ensure that slumber would remain uninterrupted by visits of Frenchmen, Spaniards, Scots and other ruffianly foreigners. In short, at its most basic, the king's government should offer simple protection from domestic and foreign lawlessness.

Monarchy fails

Given this premise, it can be seen that in the fifteenth century monarchy failed to live up to expectations. It effectively 'lost' the Hundred Years War against France, or at the very least ended it ingloriously. Although England remained safe from outright invasion from foreigners, nevertheless foreign-backed and foreign-based usurpers and challengers did regularly invade these shores well into the reign of Henry VII, while foreign kings, notably Louis XII and Charles VIII of France, were able to meddle in English politics for many years.

Furthermore, the king's peace had broken down at home. Civil strife could range from small-scale skirmish right up to the elimination of thousands of Henry VI's supporters at the Battle of Towton in 1461 – one of the bloodiest days in domestic English military history. Meanwhile, the networks of royal servants and loyalists – the justices of the peace, sheriffs and nobles – and the system of assizes and local courts, which had for centuries enforced the civil and criminal laws, were breaking down under the strain of civil strife. Private armies roamed the land. Juries were systematically intimidated. Overmighty subjects did flourish. Many took a tilt at the crown itself. Authority in England in 1485 was pretty much what the individual made of it.

Monarchy succeeds

Inertia

When Edward IV, or Henry VII, took and maintained the throne, what sustained their authority? Firstly, one should not underestimate the average subject's

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desire for a quiet life. As we shall see in examining Tudor rebellions, it took real provocation to propel most commoners onto the field of battle, and it was rare to get such individuals to travel more than ten miles to fight for their grievances.

The Divine Right

Secondly, there was a belief in the Divine Right. This was not the sophisticated doctrine it was to become under Henry VIII and the Stuart kings and under the seventeenth-century Bourbon monarchy in France. Rather, both Edward IV and Henry VII could claim that trial by battle had vindicated God's judgement in their favour (a good argument but one that could well rebound when the next successful military challenger arose). Likewise, heredity and divine choice went together, but with so many claimants who possessed royal blood to a greater or lesser degree this, too, was a dangerously adaptable doctrine.

Heredity could count for a lot. Given that all landholding and every relationship between the nobility and the king and between every noble family and its peers depended upon heredity and succession, then the production of adult male heirs to families both noble and royal was an absolutely critical requirement. To fail in this was to invite challenge to authority.

Warriors

Obviously, leadership and indeed military leadership were important. Although it was not strictly necessary for kings to emulate Alexander the Great and ride and speak in the front rank of the army, nevertheless the reputation of Henry V had derived from his warrior status while Richard III had, in fact, fatally led from the front. It is interesting to note Henry VII's good record as a successful military commander, his sensible tendency to delegate the front rank to his seasoned subordinates, and his acute sense that leadership required display and timely expenditure rather than foolish heroics.

The changing role of monarchy

An earlier generation of historians were fascinated by the efforts of Edward IV and Henry VII in seeking to create a 'new monarchy', and went to great lengths to draw out aspects of both innovation and continuity in the methods employed by these kings in administering their estates, managing their money and in directing the legal system. Yet, while there are plentiful arguments to suggest that the administrative practices of both kings owed more to the revival of successful medieval initiatives than to innovative new ones, something indisputably 'new' had happened to the job description of the monarch by the end of Henry VII's reign. After the Battle of Stoke, in 1487, it was no longer necessary for an English king to risk his own person in battle. From then on, to do so was rare indeed and, with Henry VIII and George II, it was often a case of pure martial self-indulgence on the part of the monarch.

The military requirements of upholding the king's peace could be delegated to professional captains. This delegation had always taken place as the equestrian class in Western society had always accepted the notion that the equestrian

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knight provided horse and fellow soldiers for the king's host as part of the feudal bargain. However, the experience of the Wars of the Roses had suggested an urgent need to reorganise the military relationship between king and nobility. Lancastrian and Yorkist kings learned the hard way that the simple arrangement by which a feudal host of soldiers was raised and led by the nobility in service to the king could end up all too easily in the nobles leading privately raised armies not necessarily loyal to the king. Hence Henry VII paid urgent attention to passing several laws to restrict Livery and Maintenance, that is the practice of nobles clothing and maintaining armed retainers in their own service.¹

Feudal changes and the cost of war

In fact, some very interesting developments in the art of war and the maintenance of military preparedness occurred between 1485 and 1540 that created all sorts of new problems for the Tudor kings in establishing and maintaining their authority. Improvements in gunpowder and ballistic technology and related developments in siege and fortress warfare revolutionised and vastly increased the costs of such warfare. Similarly, infantry tactics and the need for increasingly well-drilled hosts on the actual field of battle also increased expense, leaving the traditional feudal army as an unwieldy and amateurish relic.

Such changes posed several difficult problems for the Renaissance monarch. He needed to suppress the feudal levies and thus rid himself of the fear of over-mighty subjects and their liveried retainers. Moreover, by appointing such subjects to be captains of increasingly professional and loyal state forces, the monarch was usefully channelling the nobles' energy into harmless activity that was often actually highly supportive of the state. Yet the new arrangement posed difficulties, particularly for English monarchs. It lastingly altered, for example, the military relationship between England and its European neighbours. Up to 1514, perhaps up to the Treaty of London or 'Universal Peace' of 1518, which was negotiated by Wolsey, Henry VII and the young Henry VIII had been able to pose as significant partners, indeed arbiters, in European power politics. Increasingly, however, the Habsburg and Valois dynasties outstripped the English in their ability to put modern armies in the field. When Henry VIII attempted to recapture the glories of his youth in the foreign wars of the 1540s, he brought ignominy and bankruptcy upon his throne and his country. England lacked the population and therefore the sheer tax potential of the great powers. The money question was to prove critical in shaping royal authority and its relationships with all other powers in the land.

Embarrassment and rebellion

The decline of the traditional feudal host led to a simple but stark difficulty for royal authority. From 1536 to 1537, and again in 1549, 1554 and 1569, regional rebellions against the central government proved highly embarrassing and potentially fatal to the monarch, simply because the king or queen could not field an army with which to deter an armed peasantry.

Thus, during the Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536–37, Henry was faced with the acute discomfort of having to humour the complaints of Robert Aske's rebel

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pilgrims. He and the duke of Norfolk had, humiliatingly, to play for time until troops could be raised. The savage reprisals against the rebels reflected not only that humiliation, but the special need to deter future rebels and to underline the fate that awaited the rebellious.

Similar embarrassment, followed by similar savagery, characterised Elizabeth I's handling of the Revolt of the Northern Earls in 1569. The representatives of royal authority in the North were helpless and forced to sit out the revolt until Elizabeth could raise money from parliament to underwrite the force she eventually put into the field. Her agent, the earl of Sussex, testified to the power of the local earls' mounted tenantry who 'pass in troppes, armed and unarmed, so fast up and down the country that no man dare well stirre anywhere'.²

Although it was recognised, even at the time, that Elizabeth had used the opportunity to extort unnecessarily large sums from her parliament, the fact remained that she had lost control over large parts of her realm at a time of extreme internal and external danger for lack of a sufficient standing army. Again, the lowly adherents of a regional rising paid in blood for their temerity in what Fletcher describes as the government's 'orgy of revenge'.³

These two examples highlight a fortunate aspect of the relationship between royal authority and the regions. The remote nature of London's authority and the monarch's reliance upon the trustworthiness of middling men such as Robert Aske, and upon great nobles such as Westmorland and Northumberland, could lead to disaster. Nevertheless, distance ensured that a revolt on the periphery, while more likely to happen than closer to home, was more likely to fail. Bluntly, a successful rebellion needed to march on London and coerce or replace the monarch. However, given that rebellions tended to turn upon local loyalties and local grievances, and often had very ill-focused aims, they lacked a strong resolve to go on that long march. When rebels did set out from their locality, the pull of home connections, the fear of the unknown and the inability to take the great leap into full-blooded treason led to a steady desertion from the ranks. This was as true in 1536 for the Lincolnshire pilgrims as it was from 1745 to 1746 for the Highlanders who faltered at Derby, far to the south of their homeland.

However, the precarious military equation upon which central authority was based was revealed to be appallingly precarious in several incidents during the so-called mid-Tudor crisis. It is arguable, for instance, that Edward Seymour lost his position as Lord Protector largely through his foolishness in leaving his rival John Dudley in charge of the only significant army in the kingdom. Seymour had allowed Dudley to lead this force against the western rebels in 1549, leaving himself militarily and thus politically vulnerable. A few years later, Dudley, as the duke of Northumberland, probably lost his gamble in supporting the nine-day reign of Lady Jane Grey due to the paucity of his forces. Much of his mercenary army had been disbanded for lack of funds, while the remaining 2,000 troops deserted as the strength of loyalty to the legitimate queen became clear. Although Queen Mary had absconded to the safety of Suffolk to await events, it is significant that there was no need to make a formal military assault upon London, as it remained sentimentally loyal to the Tudors and hostile to the would-be usurper.

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Mary faced the consequences of military embarrassment in 1554, when Sir Thomas Wyatt's ill-organised rebellion came within a whisker of success. This was simply because, starting in Kent and centring on a march upon London, it could pose a lethal threat to the monarchy before there was any chance of putting a credible loyal force into the field to oppose it. Again, only the loyalty of the population of London and a degree of irresolution among the rebels saved the Tudor monarch.

A choice of options

Clearly, then, the relationship of the monarchy to the military was critical to the maintenance of royal authority. For the Tudors it suggested the need either to raise and maintain a standing army, with enormous implications for finance and taxation, or to create a systemic relationship between London and the regions which would at best ensure regional quiescence or, at worst, would so inhibit potential rebels as to buy time for the regime to defend itself. The above examples suggest strongly that the second option was the occasionally risky but essentially practical choice that was made.

Money and absolutism

Certainly, the obvious opportunity for the creation and maintenance of a credible standing force came in the Henrician period, when the wealth accruing from the dissolution of the monasteries might have been diverted to such a purpose. Royal absolutism, by which the king might hope to subordinate all possible competing sources of power to that of the monarchy, would then have become a possibility. Henry VIII fought his wars and the chance was lost, never really to return. European absolutism was, in some cases, able to achieve a virtuous circle, whereby a standing army could enforce the collection of taxes needed in order to maintain such an army, which could enforce royal absolutism. In England, the pretensions of royal absolutism never raised the funds to maintain the army needed to collect the taxes to maintain absolutism. It was an important loss for the Tudors and for their Stuart successors.

Even though the monarch need not necessarily attend the field of battle, certain aspects of medieval kingship remained valid.

The display of the outward trappings and personal characteristics of kingship was important. Just as Edward IV had confirmed monarchical stability through the richness of apparel and display in his court, underpinned by suitably judicious financial management, so, too, did the canny Henry VII, though the latter's canniness may well have lapsed into ill-judged parsimony. It is notable that Henry's son achieved immediate popularity not only for his extravagance, but for his martial prowess and athletic obsessions. Such display was a necessity on the stage of Renaissance monarchy, hence the excess of the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520, when Francis I of France and Henry VIII of England vied with each other in demonstrations of luxurious exhibitionism and displays of regal wrestling and jousting. (Such anachronistic chivalry could be dangerous, as the death of one of Francis's successors in a joust was shortly to confirm.)⁴

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Paul Thomas
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The Field of the Cloth of Gold, 1520. This meeting between Henry VIII and Francis I of France was an example of the pomp invested in early modern monarchy by two Renaissance monarchs. What does this lavish display tell us about the theory of the Divine Right of Kings?

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Status, esteem and regicide

Meanwhile, the brutal disposal of royal rivals did not cease altogether, but its practice suggested a distinct change in the nature of royalty. Thus, Henry VII was willing to tolerate the survival of pretenders such as Perkin Warbeck and Lambert Simnel, and even of legitimate rivals such as the earl of Warwick, for years on end. Likewise, Mary Tudor prolonged the life of Lady Jane Grey, and Elizabeth never really reconciled herself to the death of her cousin, Mary Queen of Scots.

In some ways, all European monarchs had achieved a level of esteem which made the miserable deaths in imprisonment of earlier kings such as Richard II and Henry VI seem anachronistic. Certainly, the confusion of Charles V over how exactly to treat the captured French king, Francis I, after the Battle of Pavia in 1525, suggests that a captured king could only prove an untouchable embarrassment to his royal captor. A similar predicament was thrust upon Elizabeth I by the flight from Scotland in 1568 of Mary Queen of Scots.

Until the papal bull excommunicating Elizabeth in 1570, the notion of regicide was deeply abhorrent. Elizabeth shrank from it, as had Charles V. It was too dangerous and too de-legitimising an idea to encourage. Later episodes, such as the parliamentary forces' awkwardness in possession of King Charles I from 1646–48, and the terrible fate of Damiens, the would-be assassin of Louis XV of France, who was tortured to death for the deterrence and entertainment of the Parisian crowd, re-emphasised the progress that early modern monarchy made in creating an aura of otherness and inviolability around the monarch's person. Conversely, possession of royal blood, particularly under Henry VIII, could be fatal indeed. The de la Pole family was laid waste in the first half of the sixteenth century, with Henry's thoroughness encompassing even the judicial murder of the harmless countess of Salisbury. Likewise, the duke of Buckingham in 1521 and the earl of Surrey in 1547 paid with their lives for the distinction of their bloodline.

Absolutism and central power versus regional resistance

Clearly, throughout Europe, and to a very significant degree in England, monarchy was changing and developing the nature of its authority.

It seems that the early modern state could go one of two ways, possibly even three. Changes in society, religion and the economy affected the pretensions not only of the monarchy but of all other forms of authority within a given state. Thus, inevitably, royal and centralising pretensions provoked provincial and alternative sources of authority to react. Hence, Tudor success involved bloody clashes and political trials of strength with provincial forces, most notably in the example of great earls such as Norfolk, Westmorland and Northumberland. Similarly, in France, the growing power of the monarchy came at the expense of Brittany, Burgundy and the other *pays d'état*. One way forward for the early modern state was towards successful absolutism, ultimately the achievement of the Bourbon kings of France. Yet this achievement required the imposition of a state religion, and the survival of the monarchy through the protracted upheavals of the Wars of Religion and the civil disturbances known as the *Frondes*.

Document case study

At first, England seemed bound upon this course, as Henry VIII crushed rebels and potential claimants to the throne and as the Tudors generally seemed to generate a successful mystique of royal absolutism that culminated in the reign of Elizabeth as Queen Gloriana. She held sway, significantly, in partnership with the episcopal officers of a state religion. Yet, thanks to the parliamentary struggles of the following century, the English state took a different path from both the French and the Spanish and veered towards constitutionalism. The extreme example of such a path can be seen in the fate of the state, or non-state, of Poland, where successful noble and particularist resistance to monarchy and central authority led to the helplessness of elective monarchy and the partition of the state itself in the eighteenth century. Exceptionally, of course, the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century provided for a third way exemplified by the theocracies and republics in Switzerland, the Netherlands and even, from 1649 to 1660, in England.

Document case study

Kingship and disorder**1.1 The death of Richard III**

The citizens of York, Richard III's former stronghold, give their reaction to his death

King Richard, late mercifully reigning upon us . . . with many other lords and nobility of these northern parts, was piteously slain and murdered, to the great heaviness of this city.

Source: R. Davies (ed.), *York records: Extracts from the municipal records of the City of York*, London, 1843, p. 218

1.2 The Wars of the Roses

A contemporary historian, Polydore Vergil, gives an account of the Wars of the Roses

This, finally was the end of foreign war, and likewise the renewing of civil calamity; for when the fear of outward enemy, which as yet kept the kingdom in good exercise, was gone from the nobility, such was the contention among them for glory and sovereignty, that even then the people were apparently divided into two factions . . . their two factions grew shortly so great through the whole realm . . . that many men were utterly destroyed, and the whole realm brought to ruine and decay.

Source: H. Ellis (ed.), *Three books of Polydore Vergil's English history*, Camden society, 1844, pp. 93–94

1.3 The failings of Henry VI

Polydore Vergil on Henry VI

In this same time the realm of England was out of all good governance . . . for the king was simple and led by covetous counsel, and owed more than he was worth . . . all the possessions and lordships that pertained to the Crown the king had given away, some to lords and some to other simple persons so that he had almost nought to live on.

Source: H. Ellis (ed.), *Three books of Polydore Vergil's English history*, 1844, pp. 79–80

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1.4 Edward IV takes action*From the Chronicle of Croylnd Abbey written by the monk Ingulph, 1475*

Others took to pillage and robbery, so that no road in England was safe for merchants or pilgrims. Thus the lord king was compelled to perambulate the country together with his judges, sparing no-one; even his own servants received no less than a hanging if they were detected in theft or murder. Such rigorous justice, universally carried out, put a stop to common acts of robbery for a long time to come.

Source: H. T. Riley, (ed.), *Ingulph's Chronicle of the Abbey of Croylnd, 1475*, in Denys Cook, *The sixteenth century, documents and debates*, Basingstoke, 1996, pp. 9–10

1.5 The kingship of Henry VII*Polydore Vergil on Henry VII*

His hospitality was splendidly generous . . . But to those of his subjects who did not do him the honour due to him he was hard and harsh. He knew well how to maintain his royal dignity and everything belonging to his kingship, at all times and places. He was most successful in war, although by nature he preferred peace to war. Above all else he cherished justice and consequently he punished with the utmost vigour, robberies, murders and every other kind of crime.

Source: H. Ellis (ed.), *Three books of Polydore Vergil's English history*, 1844, pp. 145–47

Document case-study questions

- 1 What does the notion in 1.1 that Richard had been 'piteously slain and murdered' suggest about the North's sympathies?
- 2 How far did 'foreign war' mentioned in 1.2 enable the early Tudors to keep their nobles safely distracted and occupied?
- 3 To what extent had the kings of England failed to maintain 'the king's peace' during the fifteenth century, and why? Use 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 to support your conclusion.
- 4 In 1.5 the author comments that Henry VII was 'successful in war'. Why was this so significant a factor for Henry?
- 5 Use 1.3, 1.4 and 1.5 to compare and contrast Edward IV's and Henry VII's methods of kingship with those of Henry VI.

Notes and references

1 See R. Lockyer, *Henry VII*, London, 1990, p. 26.

2 A. Fletcher, *Tudor rebellions*, London, 1983, pp. 85–89.

3 Fletcher, *Tudor rebellions*.

4 Henry II of France perished from injuries received in a joust, precipitating the succession of the sickly and shortlived Francis II and the kind of succession and regency problems in France which had previously worried the English monarchy.