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THE STABILITY OF HENRY VII

By B. Davis Barnhill

The Renaissance in Europe, as a topic of study, is one of the most contested and disputed. Not only do scholars disagree on a timeframe in which the Renaissance took place, but many scholars would even argue that parts of what is considered to be the “Renaissance,” did not happen the way it was previously believed to, or even that the “Renaissance” as an idea, did not happen at all. Among the most contested issues under the vast topic of the Renaissance are its effects on, and the participation of, England. The interaction between the movement of the Renaissance and the people of England was very different than anywhere else in Europe. For most places, when the ideas of the Renaissance arrived, a period of rapid change followed. This was not the case with England. Instead of a nation waiting to accept new ideas and worldviews with open arms, when the wave of the Renaissance swept through the European continent and arrived on the edges of Northern France to gaze across the English Channel, what was found was a nation so preoccupied with its own internal strife that it was almost impermeable to new ideas. Until the conclusion of the fifteenth century, England was seen by the rest of Europe as a kingdom of people stuck in the previous age, unable, or perhaps even unwilling, to move forward. However, with the conclusion of the Hundred Years War, the Wars of the Roses, and the emergence of the Tudor dynasty, an important milestone was reached in the creation of the English nation.¹ Ultimately, what brought England into the era of the Renaissance was a deliberate effort, on the part of the king, to reach a standard of stability throughout his kingdom. This stability was sought-after using a variety of means. The threat and reality of war necessitated the adoption of Renaissance era military tactics from the European continent in order to gain an advantage on the battlefield. Once military victory was achieved, it was imperative to secure the throne from usurpers, and to strengthen the delicate political climate. While the first two steps were extremely necessary in the process toward stability, no lasting and nation-wide security could be achieved without an immediate effort to repair and

¹ Hans Kohn, “The Genesis and Character of English Nationalism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 1, no. 1 (Jan., 1940): 70.

strengthen the economy, and to reach out and form new and enduring diplomatic ties. Without doubt, the king who bore the most responsibility for the striving toward, and ultimately achieving stability, was Henry VII.

One of the key wartime tactics that became a marker for warfare during the Renaissance was the use of mercenaries. By the fourteenth century, mercenary companies were the major factor in Italian warfare. Companies formed around a skilled commander and then sold their services to republics, princes, popes, or others who wished to use military force for their own ends.² By the time of the Wars of the Roses in the second half of the fifteenth century, the use of mercenaries was common all throughout Europe. The practice was used for possibly the first time by the English at the Battle of Mortimer's Cross in 1461. Another example of the use of mercenaries in the Wars of the Roses was at the Second Battle of St. Albans, where the Yorkist commander, Richard, Duke of Warwick, marched with over 500 Burgundian troops to support his English archers. Finally, at the Battle of Bosworth Field on the 22 of August 1485, Henry Tudor led, in addition to his Scottish mercenaries, a group of 1500 French troops comprised of both mercenaries and men sent by Henry's supporters in France.

Shortly following the end of the Hundred Years War, the prolonged conflict with France that helped define England during the Medieval Period, England plummeted into political and domestic turmoil in the form of the Wars of the Roses. To best understand the lack of stability in this time, a brief overview of the basic milestones is appropriate. In 1422, Henry V died and was succeeded by his infant son, Henry VI. While he grew up he was assisted in ruling by a series of ineffectual regents. Eventually, when he was 30 years old, Henry VI went mad. At that point, the stronger, more capable man, Richard Duke of York, was installed as Henry's regent as well as his heir as long as Henry did not have a son of his own. However, Henry VI had a son, who superseded Richard in the line of succession. Soon after the birth of Prince Edward, Queen Margaret grew suspicious of Richard and had him driven from England by her men.³ Richard fled to Ireland where he began to gain support to overthrow the mentally-unstable Henry VI. After five years of uneasiness, plotting, and mustering of support, Henry VI's troops met

² Michael Edward Mallet, and William Caferro, *Mercenaries and their Masters: Warfare in Renaissance Italy* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2009), 25.

³ Painter, *A History of the Middle Ages*, 379-380.

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Richard, Duke of York and his army in battle. Richard was slain during the fighting at the Battle of Wakefield, along with one of his sons. However, Edward, Richard's heir who was, "by far the ablest captain of his day, with a keen eye for strategy as well as tactics," survived.⁴ Within a year of his father's death, Edward met the Lancastrians at the Battle of Towton on March 29, 1461. Towton was the bloodiest battle ever fought on English soil, and Edward won a decisive victory that day. Edward captured and held Henry prisoner, but his wife, Margaret of Anjou, escaped. Edward then entered the city of London, and his ally, the Earl of Warwick had Edward declared King on March 27th.⁵ Almost 10 years later, Margaret, refusing to give up, defeated Edward's army in battle and forced him to flee into hiding. After the victory, Margaret made an alliance with Richard, Earl of Warwick.⁶ For a period of about seven months in the winter of 1470, the Earl of Warwick, Margaret, and others, were able to successfully depose Edward in favor of Henry VI. However, by the end of the seven months Edward once again regained his throne. Through a series of victories, he was able to defeat all of the remaining Lancastrian support he faced. He drove off Margaret, killed her son Edward, and imprisoned Henry back in the Tower where he died.⁷

In 1483 Edward IV died a peaceful death, leaving behind two sons who were too young to rule, and numerous daughters. The most natural candidate for the Regency of England was Edward's brother, Richard, Duke of Gloucester.⁸ What happened next concerning the Monarchy over the next two years is highly disputed. Edward's two sons were taken and kept in the Tower of London for, according to those who took them, their safe keeping. They were never seen again. Richard Duke of Gloucester, regent and uncle to Edward's sons, became Richard III after a parliamentary decree ruling that the boys were illegitimate. There is much debate on the degree of Richard's involvement in the plot against the boys. Richard no doubt felt that he had served his brother loyally and therefore deserved a chance to rule outright, not just as regent for Edward's son. However, they were also the sons of his beloved brother and King. Later, during the Tudor period, there was much written about Richard III that blamed him for the deaths of the boys.⁹

⁴ Ibid, 380-381.

⁵ Trevor Royle, *The Road to Bosworth Field*, 275-276.

⁶ Sidney Painter, *A History of the Middle Ages*, 381.

⁷ Trevor Royle, *The Road to Bosworth Field*, 351.

⁸ Ibid, 381.

⁹ Trevor Royle, *The Road to Bosworth Field*, 381.

When Richard took the throne in 1483, he almost certainly did not expect that his chief rival for the crown would be a man who was, at the time, in prison, named Henry Tudor. Due to the complicated nature of the genealogy amongst the Houses of York and Lancaster, what Richard surely did not realize was that in claiming the Throne for himself, he inadvertently created his own downfall by improving the quality of Henry's claim as well.¹⁰ Around Christmas, 1483, Henry received a huge stepping stone on his path to being king. Francis, Duke of Brittany endorsed Henry for the throne of England.¹¹ About that time, Richard began to become more and more uneasy about the security of his claim. He therefore had a special meeting with both houses of parliament in which he encouraged them all to take an oath of loyalty to his succession. While some of the Members of Parliament did so, it was quickly rendered irrelevant as both Richard's son and wife soon died, leaving him with no heirs.¹² By 1485 it was clear to both Richard and Henry that conflict between the two was imminent. On August 1st, Henry and 4,000 men sailed out of the Seine toward England.¹³ Throughout the build up to the conflict, it became clear that at Bosworth Field, there was to be not two armies, but three. Lord Stanley controlled an independent army out of Wales. Stanley had made secret arrangements to aid Henry, but shortly before the battle took place, Richard took Lord Stanley's eldest son hostage in an attempt to make sure that Lord Stanley did not betray him. This forced Lord Stanley and his troops to be very careful about when they chose to act.¹⁴ Shortly after the battle began on 22 August, Richard decided to take his own body guard and attack Henry personally. Henry valiantly withstood Richards attack for longer than his men thought was possible. As it began to seem as if Richard and his men might kill Henry, Lord Stanley decided to act. He and his men galloped down from their hill and cut Richard and his men down. It is said that someone found Richard's crown on the ground, and that Lord Stanley used it to crown Henry VII on the battlefield. Whether or not that story is true, the results of the battle remained the same. Henry won the throne, and became the first Tudor monarch.¹⁵

¹⁰ S.B. Chrimes, *Henry VII* (New Haven: Yale, 1999), 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁴ Chrimes, *Henry VII*, 45.

¹⁵ Chrimes, *Henry VII*, 49.

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The political climate in which Henry VII assumed the throne was one of immense chaos. While in hindsight, it can be seen that Henry would not lose his throne to a usurper, to Henry and his contemporaries this was a very real possibility. Therefore, Henry spent a large portion of his reign dedicated to the security of his crown and the stabilization of his kingdom. It was through this stability that Henry was able to facilitate the emergence of the Renaissance in England; for the stability that Henry provided was itself a Renaissance idea. One of the characteristics of the Renaissance was, “The consolidation of princely government and the decline of rivals to monarchy”.¹⁶ The great Renaissance historian Jacob Burckhardt in, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, reinforced this point when, in his section on, “The State as a Work of Art,” he quoted what he labeled as Petrarch’s, “ideal picture of a prince of the fourteenth century.” He quoted Petrarch as saying that it was best for the subjects to love the prince. He then cautioned the prince not to be harsh with his citizens, but rather to act as their father. However, Petrarch went on to clarify, “By citizens, of course, I mean those who love the existing order; for those who daily desire change are rebels and traitors, and against such a stern justice may take its course.”¹⁷ The actions of Henry VII in regards to the consolidation and protection of his power were very similar to those of the most iconic Renaissance princes of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. In fact, both Henry and the early Renaissance princes emerged out of similar situations. The ruling class of fourteenth century Italy arose from a narrowing of the base of power in a city, along with a rise in factional violence.¹⁸ In a similar way, Henry emerged from a narrowing of power due to the loss of such a large percentage of the nobility in the Hundred Years War and the Wars of the Roses. Likewise, Henry also saw a growth in factional violence as a result of this narrowing of power. The Wars of the Roses tore the nation of England apart. Therefore, when Henry VII took power in 1485, he immediately began work to make sure that internal conflict would not throw the nation into upheaval again.

¹⁶ Denys Hay, “Introduction,” In *The New Cambridge Modern History: Volume I the Renaissance 1493-1520*, ed. G.R. Potter (Cambridge: University Press, 1957), 5.

¹⁷ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 8.

¹⁸ Michael Mallett “Politics and Society 1200-1600,” In *The Oxford History of Italy*, ed. George Holmes (Oxford: University Press, 1997), 63.

Henry's first major task as a victor on the battlefield at Bosworth was to send to the castle in Yorkshire where his bride-to-be Elizabeth of York was waiting. He also took into custody, the young Edward, Earl of Warwick as a prisoner. Edward was the ten year old nephew, and once heir of Richard III. Upon his arrival in London, he was locked away in the Tower for the rest of his life.¹⁹ Henry held his first parliament in early November of 1485. There Henry's primary business was to go about securing his rule. He had parliament declare his title, reverse some of the attainders issued by Richard, and issue new attainders for the purpose of capturing traitors.²⁰ Henry then asked Parliament to do something unconventional for the purpose of securing his title. He had Parliament set the day of the beginning of his reign to the day before the Battle of Bosworth Field, on the 21st of August, so that everyone who fought against him would be considered guilty of treason.²¹ This meant that with immediate effect, Richard and 28 others were declared guilty of treason before parliament.²² When less than a year after the beginning of his reign, Viscount Lovel, Humphrey Stafford and Thomas Stafford, who were all in sanctuary, broke it so that they could escape and cause insurrection, Henry went so far as to change the law so that sanctuary no longer protected in cases of treason.²³ In 1487, a young man by the name of Lambert Simnel, with Yorkist backers claimed to be the imprisoned Earl of Warwick and fled to Ireland. The plot worked so well that Simnel was even crowned Edward VI that May in Dublin.²⁴ However, when the party returned to England to try and gather domestic support, Henry's forces massacred them. The priest, Richard Simons, who tutored Simnel, was given life imprisonment for his part in the plot. However, the boy, Lambert Simnel, was given a job working in the King's kitchen. Everyone else associated with the rebellion was put to death.²⁵ Showing the seriousness that Henry took the matter of rebellion against his title, he asked for, and received, a papal bull of excommunication for the Irish bishops who had participated in the illegal coronation of Lambert Simnel.²⁶ Henry wanted his nation and all of Europe to know that he would not allow himself to become another victim of the unstable political system

¹⁹ James Gairdner, *Henry the Seventh* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1920), 31.

²⁰ Chrimes, *Henry VII*, 61.

²¹ Gairdner, *Henry the Seventh*, 37.

²² Chrimes, *Henry VII*, 63.

²³ Chrimes, *Henry VII*, 71.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 75.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 77.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 79.

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that had been the standard in England until his reign. His actions proved this when, in early 1495, he tried for treason, and then beheaded, Sir William Stanley, the same man who saved Henry's life at Bosworth Field. His reign was plagued by constant pretenders claiming to be various Yorkist heirs, especially the Princes who were never seen again after entering the Tower, so Henry tried to put an end to the illegitimate claims. In 1500, the sons of the Duke of Suffolk, Henry's nephews, were involved in a plot to take Henry's throne. Among those executed for the plot was Sir James Tyrell, but not before he confessed to knowing for a fact that the Princes in the tower were indeed dead. Even if this confession was coerced out of Tyrell by Henry's men, it still made it more difficult for anyone to claim to be a son of Edward IV. This was exactly what Henry wanted.²⁷ It was not until 1506 that Henry VII could feel reasonably secure from the threat of Yorkist claimants.²⁸

Another key aspect of the Renaissance that Henry VII embodied very well was the idea that out of the Renaissance came, "a pattern of international relationships based on dynasticism."²⁹ Throughout his reign, Henry sought to not only secure his own throne, and the recognition of the Tudor dynasty in Europe,³⁰ but to bind the monarchy of England to the Tudor house forever. This can be seen by his promise to marry Elizabeth of York, as well as his immediate retrieval of her following the conclusion of the Battle of Bosworth Field.³¹ It is clear Henry sought first to make sure that there needed to be no more war by joining the two families in marriage. No family or group of people was as successful at the use of dynasticism as a tool to forge new international relationships, as well as to gain power, than the Hapsburgs of central Europe. While, the marriage of Margaret Tudor to James IV of Scotland was different in scale when compared to those of the Hapsburgs, it was not different in kind.³² Originally, Henry offered the idea of a marriage between James and his daughter as a way to get James to stop supporting the pretender, Richard Warbeck, in 1496.³³ Eventually, after a few skirmishes along the border between England and Scotland, James saw that the best interests of Scotland did not lie with Warbeck, and he therefore

²⁷ Chrimes, *Henry VII*, 93.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 94.

²⁹ Hay, *The New Cambridge Modern History*, 5.

³⁰ Lewis Einstein, *The Italian Renaissance in England* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1902), 41.

³¹ Gairdner, *Henry the Seventh*, 31.

³² *Ibid*, 10.

³³ Chrimes, *Henry VII*, 89.

decided to kick Warbeck out of the country. A peace treaty was signed in September 1497,³⁴ with the marriage agreement following in January 1502. In August 1503, James IV married Margaret and tied together the monarchies of England and Scotland.³⁵ However, it is not a marriage with Scotland that Henry VII is the most famous for arranging. Instead, it is the marriage of his eldest son Arthur to Catherine of Aragon. The two were married on the 14th of November, 1501, but tragically, Arthur died on the 2nd of April, 1502. This left Henry VII with only one male heir left, his son Henry, on whom to pin his hopes for a dynasty.³⁶

With the stability of the head of state secured, it was possible, for the first time in over one hundred years, for the King of England to devote a significant amount of time to the question of economics in the nation. Henry did not have to treat the economy as a second thought, but could instead focus on changing the existing policy to improve the quality of life in his kingdom. To see the impact of Henry VII's economic policies on England, it helps to first consider the economic policies under the preceding Lancastrians.³⁷ During the reign of Henry VI, it was not uncommon for European merchant vessels to stop in London. While the presence of foreign traders seeking to do business in the capital would be a favorable event in most kingdoms throughout Europe, the presence of these traders often only incited local violence surrounding foreign involvement in England. In fact, this feeling was so rooted in the minds of the people of London that, when riots broke out in January of 1455 following the arrival of a group of Venetian traders, the government of Henry VI began to warn merchants not to come to the city.³⁸ The resulting decline in goods coming into the city led to widespread shortages and inflated prices. Prices for corn rose so high that it even became more cost effective to purchase grains from York and Lincoln and ship them into London, than to buy the previously cheaper, and now scarce, goods brought in by the few foreign merchants who still risked the potential violence of the city.³⁹ When Henry VI was defeated and dethroned, he left

³⁴ Chrimes, *Henry VII*, 90.

³⁵ Gairdner, *Henry the Seventh*, 56.

³⁶ Chrimes, *Henry VII*, 93.

³⁷ Jesse H. Flemming, *England Under the Lancastrians* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1921), 243.

³⁸ Flemming, *England Under the Lancastrians*, 247.

³⁹ Flemming, *England Under the Lancastrians*, 250.

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England in a state of a “debilitating period of recession.”⁴⁰ It was into this economic situation that Henry VII assumed the throne. However, unlike his Lancastrian and Yorkist predecessors, Henry VII concluded his reign a wealthy king.⁴¹ One of Henry’s first acts in Parliament was to return the lands that had been distributed to the nobility during the reigns of previous kings. Most importantly, Henry immediately brought the Duchies of Cornwall and Lancaster back under the control of the Crown. This action yielded a considerable amount of income for the King.⁴² While on the throne, his economic policies brought his kingdom out of poverty and into prosperity. During his reign, Henry VII tripled the income, and established a balanced budget.⁴³ This stability made the emerging middle class of England by far the most loyal to Henry throughout his reign.⁴⁴

The emergence of the Renaissance in England occurred in a unique manner. The instability of the political and military situations in the nation left it simply too pre-occupied to embrace the ideas of the Renaissance for many years. It was through a gradual adoption of Renaissance tools and ideas that allowed for stability to come to England; and it was for that stability that Henry VII worked so tirelessly. It was the use of Renaissance military ideas that aided in the faster resolution of the factional violence. Henry’s relentless pursuit to consolidate the power in his kingdom with himself alone provided peace and stability that his contemporaries had not known in their lives. His dedication to the formation of diplomatic relationships through the use of dynasticism, not only as a power grab, but as a tool for peace as well, sought to ensure that his house and legacy would continue long after he did. Henry’s change of economic policies allowed for a stronger and more prosperous nation that could fully enjoy the ideas and expressions of the Renaissance. While he had no way of planning for the events that the future of his kingdom or house would hold, Henry VII’s impact on England allowed for the emergence of a nation that, no longer held back by internal conflicts, could begin to lead the world in innovation.

⁴⁰ Hay, *The New Cambridge Modern History*, 6.

⁴¹ G.R. Elton, *England under the Tudors* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1959), 46.

⁴² Chrimes, *Henry VII*, 63.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 53.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 43.