Henry VIII and the Invention of the Royal Court

Although the historiography of the royal court has only relatively recently been revived as a vogue subject, it has already established a number of articles of faith. Chief among these is the crucial importance of the Tudor period in the development of the court as an institution. It was Professor Geoffrey Elton who made the point most emphatically: the creation of the royal court as a political instrument could be dated to a very definite historical period – the reign of Henry VIII. It was to this period that he traced the development of the court as a centre – indeed the centre – of national politics, the arena to which the great and the powerful were drawn. And the work of Elton's pupil David Starkey, although in many ways critical of Elton's methodologies and findings, has tended on this issue to support and extend those conclusions.

The Tudor innovations are argued to have ushered in a number of fundamental changes to the nature of the royal court and of political culture more generally. First there was the creation of the court as the fulcrum of national politics, resulting in a decline in the political power and influence of the magnates in the shires and the rise of the courtier nobleman.. Consequent upon this change there developed a new and distinct form of courtly politics dominated by faction and characterised, by its detractors at least, as encouraging venality, intrigue and corruption.

A further feature of the process was the creation of a novel politics of intimacy based upon proximity to the sovereign and access to his person. Finally these changes both reflected and enabled a new and more subtle use of royal power, employing artistic propaganda, theatrical gestures and performances, and the very mechanisms of court life and behaviour to create an environment conducive to the ever-more autocratic style of king- ship favoured by the 'new monarchy' of the Tudors. But how convincing are these claims?

Central to the idea of the new Tudor court, as it had been to the earlier notion of a 'New Monarchy' in the sixteenth century, is the claim that the powerful, 'overmighty' barons of the fifteenth century were transformed in the sixteenth into court politicians and so denied the advantages of their local influence and power. This 'taming' of the great magnates and creation of a courtier nobility formed both the basis of Henry's power and the foundation stone of the newly politicised court. As Elton asserted, 'the true court of our imagining did not exist until the Crown had destroyed all alternative centres of loyalty or (to emphasise another function of the court) all alternative sources of worldly advancement'.

Dr George Bernard has effectively demonstrated the inaccuracy of this analysis, arguing compellingly that the nobility of the sixteenth century had lost little of the power and influence enjoyed by their Lancastrian and Yorkist forebears; that there was no royal policy to humiliate and tame the 'overmighty' aristocrats of the Henrician era; and that there was no decisive move in the period towards the creation of a subservient, court- based 'service' nobility. But the myth of the taming of the nobility retains its appeal – and not just for students of the Henrician period. For the model has been applied to other moments of allegedly decisive political change also.

Most famously, perhaps, the idea of the 'courtisation of the warriors' (verhoflichung der kreiger) provided the framework for Norbert Elias' seminal analysis of the 'civilising process' and the creation of a court society. For Elias, the crucial site for this process was the court of Louis XIV of France at Versailles, and so the phenomenon should be dated relatively late in the seventeenth century. But historians of earlier periods have made similar claims for their own particular fields. For Professor Anthony Tuck, it was under Richard II that 'a new courtier nobility was coming into existence which took precedence over the established aristocracy in access to the king, in patronage, and even to some degree in influence in the localities'. These courtier politicians, typified by Richard's Chamber Knights, debased the traditional values ascribed to their calling, prompting the contemporary observer Thomas Walsingham to describe them as: ...

> *more knights of Venus than of Bellona, more potent in the bed-chamber than on the battlefield,*
> *strnnger with the tongue than with the lance, always ready to talk, but never to perform acts of war.*

The dilution of the old aristocracy by upstart 'new men', more compliant but less able than their forebears, was also seen as characteristic of the reign of Edward III. At some point after 1340 the author of The Simonie alleged that,

> *Kunne a boy nu breke a spere, he shal be mad a kniht. And thus ben knihtes gadered of unkinde blo[o]d, And envenimeth that ordre that sholde be so go[o]d and hende.*

Three centuries earlier, Orderic Vitalis had described how Henry I had raised up 'new men' from the dust, and how, even before that, when many of William I's magnates had died, they had been replaced during William Rufus' reign by under- lings whom he exalted by granting them wide honours as a reward for their flattery.

Contemporary evidence can be cited for each claim, and indeed for each century between the eleventh and the seventeenth (and beyond). Thus, in English political history, this process whereby an essentially military caste of powerful men was either converted into or replaced by a more sophisticated and tractable class of courtiers can be traced back at least as far as Canute's imposition of the lex castrensis sive curiae on his knights, which was described in very much these terms by Saxo Grammaticus.

So frequently is this model employed, indeed, both by modern historians and contemporary observers, to explain the operation of the court in the political system, that it is tempting to identify it as a time- less historical constant. Just as it is in the very nature of 'the middle classes' (however defined) and 'bourgeois culture' always to be rising, and of feudal society always to be correspondingly in terminal decline, so, it seems, it is in the nature of the 'old nobility' always to be displaced and dispossessed by a new courtier class, or shorn of its lawless, overmighty independence and educated out of its boorish, war-like habits into courtly defence by a shrewd, centralising monarch. But, as with these other great movements in history, this process proves on closer examination to be always in the making and never securely achieved.

Correspondingly, the idea of the court as a centre of a particular set of non-militaristic values and codes of behaviour – the place where the boorish aristocrats might be educated into new modes of behaviour – proves to have a longer history than many Tudor historians have assumed. Far from being a product of Tudor innovation, the image of the court as a centre for the definition and refinement of elite manners, urbanity and the sort of sprezzatura display described in Castiglione's Book of the Courtier has, as Stephen Jaeger has shown, a considerable pedigree. The court of Henry II in England provided a model of courtliness defined in precisely these terms. And the idea that the defining quality of the courtier was his ability to speak 'facete', that is urbanely and wittingly, can be traced back at least as far as the court of Canute's successor King Sweno, and the Gesta Danorum, and can ultimately be followed, via Cicero, to its roots in Homer, Socrates and Menander.

Other supposedly novel features of the Henrician period have a similarly long history. The role of the court as a hot-bed of factional intrigue, back-biting and corruption, so emphasised by historians such as David Starkey as characteristic of Henry's reign, seems to be another constant factor in courtly history. It is clear that the poets and commentators of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had a well-developed sense of distinctly 'courtly' vices which they drew upon in their works. Around I420 Alain Chartier claimed with confidence that: The court, to the end that thou understand it, is a covenant of people that, under fantasy of common weal, assemble together for to deceive each other ... And sometime for their money we sell to them our humanity precious. We buy other[s] and other[s] buy us.

And this model of the court as a centre of factional intrigue was clearly sufficiently well accepted in the 1380s for Chaucer to refer to it as a proverbial touchstone for such behaviour. In The Knight's Tale Arcite rationalises his new and startling enmity for his cousin Palamon with the quip:

> *And therefore, at the Kynges court, my brother,*
> *Ech man for hymself, ther is noon other.*

It was the twelfth century, however, and the court of Henry II that produced the most sustained literary and cultural reflection upon – and condemnation of – the vices and hostilities which were seen as characteristic of the royal court. It was during this period that Peter of Blois coined the phrase 'miseriae curialium': the miseries of courtiers, which could act as an epitome of the writings of that influential group of anti-court writers including Peter of Blois himself, John of Salisbury, Gerald of Wales and Walter Map. The idea that the court was a hot-bed of faction was also evidently no novelty in this period, for Herbert of Bosham had sobering advice for the would-be courtier on this score in his biography of Becket:

> *Anyone who fears the venom of the court serpents and who flees their poison must leave the court, since if he himself shrinks from striking, he will be stung and infected by another's bite. The more secret, the more concealed the serpent's identity, the more dangerous the sting.*

Similar corruption was perceived by one observer to characterise the English court under William Rufus, where, it was claimed, no unnatural vice was left unpursued. Again, then, that which has been claimed to be novel in the court of Henry VIII, proves on closer inspection to have a venerable history.

For David Starkey, one important consequence of Henry VII's creation of a new department of the household, the Privy Chamber, and Henry VIII's subsequent staffing of it with his boon companions rather than the menial servants of his father's reign, was the development of a distinctive politics of intimacy. Those men who served in the inner sanctum of the royal household and enjoyed a particularly close relationship with the king, it is claimed, gained thereby a particular and novel status. This in turn allowed them to be employed as representatives of the king's person on diplomatic and political business away from the court: the king's faith in them and their known closeness to him providing them with an authority far greater than any paper warrant or letter of introduction could grant. Hence the reign saw a growth in the power and influence of men such as Sir William Compton, Henry's Groom of the Stool, and those royal 'min- ions' briefly expelled from the court in 1519, who combined proximity with the king with social or political standing in their own right.

But the novelty of all this is over-stated. Proximity to the sovereign had always carried its own attendant kudos and responsibilities. The Chamber Knights of the fifteenth century clearly enjoyed both a role and responsibilities not essentially dissimilar to those of the Henrician Privy Chamber men. As Professor Gerald Harris has argued, such men, 'wearing the king's livery, carried the full weight of royal authority. It was, equally, their enjoyment of the king's confidence and familiarity that made them unique channels of petitions for his grace'. Thus, when Sir John Paston wanted to petition for royal favour in 1479, he not only lobbied Lord Hastings and Bishop Morton, but also focused his attention upon those men 'which wait most upon the King and lie nightly in his chamber'.

Two centuries earlier, John of Salisbury had fulminated against flatterers and office-seekers for acting in ways surprisingly reminiscent of those described by Starkey as the result of the creation of the Privy Chamber. For John as for Starkey, the key to advancement at court was gaining the ear of those who performed even the most menial of tasks for the king, as such people had the access to him which was the cornerstone of influence. The aspirant office-seeker of the twelfth century would thus 'lavish gifts', visit potentates, soliciting their ministers and familiars ... [and] in the great houses they ask not only the high officials, but even the hair- dressers to keep them in mind, should they see a vacant position'. While the development of the Privy Chamber may have altered the institutional framework of the court, then, it did not fundamentally alter the realities of royal favour and influence upon which courtly politics rested.

Henry VIII's use of theatrical judicial ceremonies to impose his will upon his subjects, his employment of visual images of himself, such as the imposing Holbein mural, to abash and overawe those entering the royal presence, and his conscious cultivation of royal magnificence to impress foreign diplomats and unnerve potentially overmighty subjects at home, have all been advanced as important innovations in royal style and governmental strategy novel to the reign. But, again, each element can be found in an already well-developed form in the reigns of Henry's predecessors.

The use of royal magnificence for political ends was evidently fully appreciated by Edward IV, who spent £1,000

on his coronation alone, thereby exemplifying the philosophy later spelt out in the 1485 Act of Resumption, which advised the king to practice the kind of conspicuous consumption 'by the which your Adversaries and Enemies shall fall into the dread wherein heretofore they have been'. Richard II's use of his royal regalia and costuming, and his commissioning of works of art such as the Wilton Diptych and the Westminster portrait would certainly seem the equal of anything undertaken in the reign of Henry VIII. But in reality one can detect a similar conscious employment of conspicuous consumption and display for political ends in reigns as early as those of Henry II and William Rufus.

The later Plantagenet kings would have had equally little to learn from Henry VIII about how to impose their will upon their subjects through courtly ceremony and the subtle nuances of extending or withdrawing royal favour. After the churching of his queen, Elizabeth Woodville, Edward IV imposed upon his court a remarkably painful lesson in respect and humility. As the queen dined for the first time after her return to public life, she sat upon a golden chair while everyone else knelt in deference. After the first course had been served, her sisters and the king's mother were allowed to sit, but the rest of the court had to remain kneeling for the full three-to-four hour duration of the meal. A similar humiliating ordeal was practised by Richard II. After dinner on feast days, the king would 'make in his chamber a throne, wherein he was wont to sit from after dinner unto evensong time, speaking to no man, but overlooking all men; and if he looked on any man, whatever estate or degree that ever he were of, he must kneel'. Judged against such stifling use or protocol, the boisterous bullying occasionally practised at Henry VIII's court seems almost democratic.

More subtle, perhaps, was Edward IV's capacity to demonstrate royal displeasure and discipline his servants with merely a look, as when Thomas Norton, a royal esquire, fell into disfavour:

> *And when the said Thomas Norton came into the King's presence, the King estranged his look from him, and he [Norton] perceived that and departed from the court ... and all the court hath him in such loathness that no creature accompanied nor made him any cheer.*

Each aspect of court culture cited as evidence of Henry VIII's innovative policies proves on second glance actually to show just how conventional the politics and culture of his court were perceived to be by those who wrote about it. What can be learned from this? Is it simply that history repeats itself endlessly: that, as Chaucer observed, 'Ther is no newe gyse that is nas old'? Or is it that contemporary commentators, perceiving that to be the case, sought out and isolated (perhaps atypical) incidents of the kind of phenomena which they expected to encounter at court and wrote about them in ways which their reading of other chronicles and authorities had conditioned them to do? If courts were expected to be places of corruption, sycophancy and intrigue, then it is no surprise that people wrote about them in those terms.

A major difficulty in determining just how innovatory Henry VIII's court really was is the fact that, conventionally, courts were always described as innovatory in certain kinds of sources, as 'novelty' was seen as an intrinsic part of what courtliness and certain sorts of monarchy were all about. Good kings appeared novel by reforming the familiar vices and inefficiencies which had been allowed to creep in by their ineffectual predecessors, bad kings appeared novel by permitting such problems to appear in the first place. We should thus not be swayed by such claims to see real change where it may not have been present.

The royal court was, of course, a profoundly paradoxical phenomenon, and its inhabitants played a highly ambivalent role in late medieval and early Renaissance culture. To be a courtier implied an immense social distinction. It was to be one of the undoubtedly elite members of a highly elitist society: to be at the centre of the political, cultural and social world, a follower and a setter of exemplary manners picked out from the mass of humanity to serve the sovereign in the innermost sanctum of the realm. But to be a courtier also carried an attendant social stigma. The very word carried unwholesome connotations of moral inadequacy, self-interest, and self- indulgence. As satirists had claimed from classical times onwards, to be a part of the magnificent showcase of sovereignty was also to be a denizen of the cess-pool of flattery, fornication, and back-stabbing, a sycophantic participant in the abject scramble for royal favour. So much was this so, indeed, that while everyone – or almost everyone – would do almost anything to get a place at court, almost no one would willingly refer to themselves as

a 'courtier'. The preferred terms remained 'household man' or 'servant to the king'.

And here it is important to distinguish between different kinds of sources and the kinds of evidence which they can provide. Crucially, one must be aware of the distinct conventions governing literary portrayals of the court – in drama, satirical poetry, panegyric and romance, but perhaps especially in those chronicles which historians tend to think of as hardly literary sources at all. Each employs the notion of courtliness to its own distinct ends. Professor Elton saw considerable significance in Shakespeare's portrayal of kingship in Henry V. He argued that the playwright's decision to show Henry's rival Charles VI of France in the midst of his court, but Henry V himself only at the council table, in martial camp, and on the battlefield was a crucial recognition of the lack of a definable royal court in English culture in the early fifteenth century. But here is an object lesson in the importance of being aware of the conventions within which one's sources operate. For Shakespeare's failure to portray Henry V in a courtly setting owes little to the realities of Lancastrian statecraft and everything to the dictates of Tudor stagecraft. What Shakespeare is exploring in Henry V is, of course, a dramatic contrast between two nations and two kings, one heroic, workmanlike, popular and English, the other disdainfully over-confident, elitist and French. Hence the decision to show the former in camp and the latter at court is an artistic choice, not an antiquarian one. The council meetings and martial camps in which Henry is portrayed are markers of a strenuous, active, virtuous sovereignty, while the court scenes of the French connote their foppish, complacent inactivity.

When Shakespeare wished to reflect criticism upon his kings he placed them in courts. Hence we see Richard II (who, as he preceded Henry V ought, in Elton's terms, to have had even less to do with courts) among his favourites at court and in his household, but never in council or martial camp. Even when notionally in the field, as on his return from Ireland, Richard is depicted in an inherently non-martial and domestic setting, sitting on the ground and exchanging sad stories of the death of kings among his familiar servants and creatures.

The court in literature and the court in fact were, then, distinct but mutually informing phenomena. When portrayed in literary sources, the court is used to symbolise a very limited range of notions, almost invariably either as a vehicle for royal magnificence or an arena for corruption and vice. If a writer wished to show a king's wealth or royal grandeur, then he might set him in his court, as happens with King Arthur in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Cambyuskan in Chaucer's Squire's Tale, or Henry VIII in Edward Hall's Chronicle. Otherwise, courtly settings act as markers of weakness. Royal virtues other than magnificence were generally depicted through scenes of counsel, justice-giving or warfare, representing the three central duties of the good sovereign, to take sound advice, uphold the law and lead the nation in just wars. Consequently the courtier has a very circumscribed role in the literature of good kingship. While good kings have counsellors, retainers and followers, it is bad kings who have courtiers.

Such sources tell us little about the realities of the royal court. That chroniclers and playwrights spoke of Henry VIII's court in terms of novelty and innovation is significant only in so far as such authors generally spoke about royal courts in those terms. It may have been that Henry conducted himself with a greater sense of courtly style than his rather more reserved father, but this, if true, was a difference of degree rather than of kind. More plausibly the reign has appeared innovatory to modern scholars for reasons which have actually very little to do with the realities of the situation. The survival of a greater quantity and range of documentary sources for court politics in the Henrician period – letters between courtiers, household ordinances, and narrative accounts such as Hall's Chronicle and George Cavendish's Life of Wolsey – can create the impression of novelty and of particularly energetic activity when the reality was actually less impressive.

The existence of the magnificent sequence of paintings and sketches of Henry's courtiers and ministers by Holbein has also had a profound effect upon the way we see the reign. Yet the fact that Henry was able to call upon the services of so gifted an artist was essentially a historical accident and tells us little, if anything, about any policy of artistic propaganda the king may have employed. In reality the king did very little to encourage Holbein in such work, and employed him primarily in rather mundane tasks.

Finally the fact that the Henrician period did see major innovation in other areas, chiefly in the break with Rome and the beginnings of the Reformation, can have an effect of its own. A king who was innovatory in one area, is often, mistakenly assumed to be innovatory in all. In each case we should beware of the misleading assumption that greater documentation and greater activity in other areas inevitably indicates greater activity at court. In this

case at least, it is important to see the reign of Henry VIII as marking continuity of policy and practice, rather than radical innovation.

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