

Puissance and Poverty: Henry VIII and the Conquest of France

When, in November 1511, Henry VIII plunged headlong into war against France on behalf of the Holy League, his realm remained a small and comparatively insignificant island on the damp and misty fringe of Europe. Apart from Wales and the Channel Islands, the only meagre traces of English 'empire' were, in fact, a boggy foothold in Ireland, along with a narrow strip of territory, centring on Calais and the castle of Guisnes, which stretched some 20 miles along the French coast. And though, for its size, England may well have been one of the wealthier kingdoms in Europe, Henry's little realm of around 2.5 million souls, bordered by an independent Scotland and as such only 'half an island', could still scarcely compete with 16 million Frenchmen. Nor, in the long term, could it ever realistically hope to manipulate some 8 million Spaniards for its own purposes, let alone the 20 million Dutch, Flemish and Germans who owed taxes to the Holy Roman Emperor.

Yet by the time he had been unleashed as King of England in April 1509, just nine weeks short of his eighteenth birthday, Henry VIII's desire to secure his own glorious niche in history was already set in stone. And this could mean only one thing: the re-conquest of his ancestral lands in France, regardless of the political damage or financial cost involved. Ultimately, this gnawing obsession to gain honour and glory abroad would become the overriding priority of his reign and carry him across the Channel as a would-be warrior on two separate occasions – first as a hearty and headstrong young prince and finally as a gross, decrepit and deluded old man.

What, then, were the roots of Henry's craving for conquest, and, equally importantly, what were its consequences for the realm he ruled?

Puissance

There is no doubt, in fact, that the king's fixation with power, influence and military might – or what contemporaries termed 'puissance' – can be traced to his earliest years. Erasmus, for instance, who saw him a number of times during this period, was in no doubt that the prince's 'dream as a child had been the recovery of the French provinces'. And the influences which fanned this boyish fantasy blew, it seems, from every direction.

On the one hand, Henry was thoroughly immersed as a boy in a particularly potent, if largely mythical, set of conventions derived from the medieval code of chivalry. In the year of his birth, more than a score of books extolling knightly virtues and heroic deeds were in circulation from William Caxton's presses alone, and the high points of English valour during the Hundred Years' War, such as Edward III's siege of Tournai in 1340 and the capture of Therouanne six years later, were all indelibly etched on his mind by tutors, such as the poet John Skelton. Having been duly reared, too, on romantic tales of the Holy Grail and Round Table, Henry's later reading of Malory and Froissart was also of English kings waging triumphant war on French soil.

This chivalric culture was by no means confined to literature and the classroom, however. From the time of his initiation as Prince of Wales in 1502, Henry had been encouraged to keep the company of other boys and youths, known as 'henchmen', who would prove instrumental in shaping his mental world. Varying considerably in age, their number included Edward Neville, Henry Courtenay, Nicholas Carew and, most famously of all, the glamorous and extrovert Charles Brandon. Together these individuals were enlisted to participate in Henry's exhaustive military training and, in due course, they would come to constitute a throbbing circle of 'boon companions', which thrived on mock combat and endless tales of 'bold bawdry and open manslaughter'.

At the same time, Henry's intense chauvinism was being steadily reinforced by his own family. It was widely known, for instance, that the boy's hugely influential grandmother, Lady Margaret Beaufort, harboured her own smouldering sense of grievance against the French, as a result of their persistent failure to repay a ransom fee advanced by her mother on behalf of the Duke of Orleans after his capture at the battle of Agincourt. More significantly still, Henry's father, who created him earl marshal at the age of three, consciously modelled his court upon a Burgundian prototype which interpreted most aspects of kingship in stridently militaristic terms. It was no accident, for instance, that during Henry VII's reign a succession of English monarchs would be portrayed at

Richmond Palace 'like bold and valiant knights', and it was no coincidence either that the old king's most revered relic was a leg of St George, which had supposedly been captured at the siege of Milan.

Perhaps it should come as no real surprise, then, that foreign visitors and courtiers alike were soon freely predicting that the heir to the throne 'would renew the name of Henry V'. And the young prince's identification with this particular monarch would, indeed, become one of the most outstanding features of his evolving self-image. The victor of Agincourt's dented war helmet still hung on his tomb at Westminster and, superficially at least, the two princes had much in common. Both, after all, were the sons of troubled usurpers and both would seek to affirm their dynasties by means of an aggressive foreign policy. Each, too, as a Christian warrior-prince, a devout defender of the Church. Predictably, then, when the time came, Henry VIII's badge of war, the Lancastrian red rose, would be borrowed straight from his predecessor.

There was also, of course, the anti-French bile of Henry's subjects to fuel his own prejudices. Even in peacetime, the English were belchingly contemptuous of all Frenchmen and when Londoners were not rioting against Venetian, Spanish and Burgundian merchants, they were regularly singling out their French counterparts for special intimidation. English writers, in their turn, depicted France as a nation of downtrodden and perfidious peasants, and it comes as no surprise early in the reign to find a Spanish merchant observing that 'the best word an Englishman can find to say of a Frenchman is "French dog"'. It was hardly surprising either that before 1513 was out many French nobles would be surrendering to Netherlanders after the so-called Battle of the Spurs, since the English were once again rumoured to be taking no prisoners.

Last but not least, England's elites were fully primed for war across the Channel, though they did not, it must be said, force their sovereign's hand. The prevailing view of the operation of fortune's wheel in history only reinforced the misconception that France had now had her day, especially since a fall was always expected to accompany the kind of proud and greedy expansionism pursued by French kings since 1453. And while Henry's oldest councillors, like the Earl of Surrey, had lived just long enough to remember the national agony at the loss of France, the headstrong young bucks who now featured so prominently at court had no notion whatsoever of the harsh realities of defeat.

Well before the first year of his reign was out, then, Henry had already reinforced Calais, ordered general musters, commissioned new artillery, expanded and upgraded his father's small bodyguard of courtiers, the king's spears, and initiated an expansion of the navy which would quintuple its forces by 1515. In the process, he had also made all the right warlike noises. Lord Berners – a 'martial man well seen in all things military', who became master of the royal ordnance – was, for instance, personally invited by Henry to translate Froissart's romantic account of the Hundred Years' War, while the king himself seized every available opportunity to proclaim his duty 'to seek fame by military skill'. He hoped, it was said, 'to create such a fine opinion about his valour among all men that they could understand that his ambition was not merely to equal but to excel the glorious deeds of his ancestors'. And as the reign went forward it was this consuming dream that Thomas Wolsey tapped into and offered to turn into effortless reality.

Poverty

Neither Wolsey nor anyone else, for that matter, would ever deliver the lasting success that his master sought so desperately, and both he and Henry would have done well to heed Louis XII's advice that in war 'three things must be made ready: money, money and once again money'. Certainly Henry's so-called 'ordinary revenue' was soon being stretched to the limit by his early attempts to impress as a lavish and bountiful Renaissance prince. Allocations to both his household and wardrobe accounts, for instance, more than doubled at a time when income from crown lands was falling from £50,000 per annum in Henry VII's time to £34,000 in 1512 and £25,000 in 1515.

In such circumstances, a French war could only be financed in one of three ways. On the one hand, there was the option of using up the previously accumulated reserves amassed in Henry VII's main treasury, the Chamber, which amounted to the respectable but far from substantial sum of around £300,000. Direct taxes, like the so-called 'fifteenths' and 'tenths', were, of course, another option. But the sums involved would still be insufficient on their own, and they were, in any case, slow to collect and obtainable only with parliamentary consent. The last alternative was to make use of 'benevolences', i.e. forced loans, which is what Henry largely seems to have done.

Even allowing for clerical taxation, however, the cost of Henry's foreign policy was always an insurmountable problem. Innovations, such as the so-called 'subsidy', which was a kind of income tax reputedly launched by Wolsey in 1512, never successfully made up the shortfall in revenue. In its favour, this measure did enable the government to raise about £170,000 between 1513 and 1516, and, along with three fifteenths and tenths plus £40,000 from clerical taxation, Henry's total revenue during this time would ultimately stretch to the considerable sum of £300,000. Yet the cost of war for the same period soared to at least double that amount.

Certainly, the tinsel victories of 1513, which would prove to be Henry's sole claim to fame, were no compensation for the crippling expense involved. The fortress of Therouanne, for instance, had been sorely under-defended and lightly lost by mischance, while English claims that 3,000 Frenchmen had fallen at the skirmish, which became known to posterity as the battle of the Spurs, appear to have been wildly exaggerated. Likewise, the town of Tournai, Henry's most treasured prize, had been no more than grudgingly fortified by the French, while the town's strategic importance was, in any case, largely neutralised by the encircling territories of the Netherlands. Moreover, by the time that the French retrieved it for the sum of £100,000 in 1518, it had already cost Henry £230,000 to fortify.

Perhaps the supreme irony, however, was that when it came to martial prowess the King of France was actually to achieve what the King of England only talked and dreamt about. In spite of Henry's confident boasts – 'If I choose he will cross the Alps and if I choose, he will not' – Francis I did, indeed, cross the Alps in 1515 to win a crushing victory at Marignano before taking Milan, the keystone to the papal dominions, and mastering Italy as far as Naples. The French armies had done so, moreover, in the kind of gory combat that made Henry's first campaign across the Channel seem little more than a summer outing. 'For two thousand years', Francis wrote to his mother, 'there has not been so grand or so hard a battle'. And to gall his English counterpart further, the French king had been in the thick of the fighting throughout.

Never in the years that followed would Henry even remotely approach this level of success. When, in 1522, an English army once again took the field in France – this time under the Earl of Surrey – its only 'success' was to incinerate everything it could find over a poverty-stricken and plague-ridden area of some 40 square miles around the town of Lottinghen. And though the Duke of Suffolk's efforts in the following year promised more when he penetrated to within 40 miles of Paris, the English were ultimately let down, not for the first or last time, by Imperial generals. The combined cost of both campaigns, meanwhile, was a grand total of £400,000.

Not long afterwards, the cost of Henry's pretensions would reach an ominous climax at what was, perhaps, the only moment when he ever came even remotely close to subjugating his archrival. On this occasion, the Holy Roman Emperor's crushing victory at Pavia in 1525, which resulted in the capture of Francis I and the securing of Italy, seemed to leave the French utterly vulnerable. However, the Emperor himself was unwilling to help his English ally gain 'full satisfaction from France' and, even more alarmingly for Henry, his own subjects were disinclined to foot the bill for any further military spree on their sovereign's behalf. Indeed, when the tax known as the 'Amicable Grant' was finally proposed, London, Kent and East Anglia teetered on the brink of rebellion before the king himself was left with no choice but to pardon the protestors and order Wolsey to pay their expenses.

Fittingly, perhaps, it would be almost 20 years before Henry contemplated another frontal assault on France and by that time he had become a gross physical parody of the flaxen-haired warrior prince who had first crossed the Channel in 1513. By the summer of 1544, in fact, his armour now measured all of 57 inches across the chest, and on those rare occasions that he edged forth from the specially reinforced litter in which he was to make his curious French odyssey, he would have to be winched by crane into the royal saddle.

Fittingly, too, the king's ambitions remained every bit as inflated as his ailing bulk. The entire campaign in the 'ungracious dog-holes' of France was, of course, a wildly improbable enterprise from the outset, and it ended all too predictably. Although Boulogne was captured in September, none of the projected huge gains in northern and south-western France were achieved. Then, to compound matters, the emperor rapidly withdrew from the war, leaving Henry to face a possible French invasion in 1545, along with an actual French landing on the Isle of Wight – the prelude to which was the sinking of the *Mary Rose*. No glory was won, no gain accrued. In short, the English tyrannosaur had once again begotten a tadpole.

The costs, by contrast, were more staggering than ever. A military revolution of sorts was by this time utterly

outstripping royal revenues and the gap between princely posturing and harsh economic reality was starker than ever. Mercenaries' wages, in particular, were out of control and armies of ten thousand, which had once consumed whole kingdoms, had by now swollen drastically. The English force, which campaigned for three months in France in 1544, for instance, consisted of 42,000 men and cost just under £587,000, while the total expense of Henry's wars between 1542 and 1546, which also involved Scotland, of course, amounted to £2,144,000 – some ten times as much as the expenditure on the French campaigns that had followed his accession.

Conclusions

Henry VIII's unrelenting quest for puissance was, then, the main benchmark by which he came to measure his own ultimate success as a ruler. Marital adventures would punctuate his reign, of course. Religious experiment would also be a recurring theme. But by and large these things offered vexation rather than fulfilment and to a man such as Henry the prospect of conquest was infinitely preferable. Playing with marriage could not, after all, compare to playing at soldiers, while religious dabbling was a long and winding process offering no decisive outcome of the kind that could, in theory at least, be gained in a single morning on the field of battle.

Yet this pursuit of shadows abroad would mean that the man who had begun his reign safe and solvent would ultimately be left to the tender mercies of Antwerp money-lenders whom he milked for loans – at interest rates of 10 and 14 per cent – which totalled £75,000 by his death. And, on top of all this, he would still need to impose taxes and forced loans upon his realm that were heavier than any levied hitherto. Worst of all, over half of the necessary war expenditure of his final years would be paid for by resort to a grievous debasement of the coinage and the sale of crown lands. The coins minted in 1544, for example, contained only half their weight in fine silver, while those of 1546 consisted of no more than a third, and though this attempted fraud made the war possible in the short-term, it did so only by stoking rampant inflation in the next reign. Plainly, the exploits were few, the exploited many.

Issues to debate

- What, if any, were the high points in Henry VIII's conduct of Anglo-French relations?
- What were Henry's alternatives in dealing with France, and how realistic were they?
- Why did English aggression undergo an apparent lull during the 1530s?

Further reading

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- C. Cruickshank, *Henry VIII and the Invasion of France* (1990)
- S. J. Gunn, 'The French wars of Henry VIII' in *The Origins of War in Early Modern Europe*, ed. J. Black (1987)
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- Lucy Wooding, *Henry VIII* (2008)

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