

Henry VII, Pretenders and Rebellions

King Henry VII holding a Tudor Rose, wearing collar of the Order of the Golden Fleece, dated 1505, by unknown artist,

Henry VII was never in serious danger of losing his throne to either a rebellion or a conspiracy. For either of these to succeed, a combination of specific circumstances would have been necessary. First, those seeking the throne needed to be credible and viable alternatives to him. Second, Henry VII had to be isolated and there needed to be enough domestic support for an invasion to ensure that it did not look like a self-interested act of political speculation by either foreign powers or isolated English malcontents. Third, foreign powers possessed of the requisite military and financial muscle had to be prepared to support an invasion. These circumstances never fully materialised.

The Claimants

For Henry VII to be seriously threatened by any of the challenges he faced, these needed to be mounted in support of a viable alternative claimant. Viability in this context does not just mean having a decent claim to the throne. After all, Henry VII had a weak claim and he still succeeded in taking the throne in 1485. In fact, historians tend to set too much store by Henry's weak claim in terms of measuring his security in 1485-87 and have overlooked what really made the difference for him. This was the fact that he was not the political pawn of a narrow self-interested clique as were Lambert Simnel and Perkin Warbeck (both of whom served the narrow interests of die-hard Yorkists out of step with the prevailing political mood of reconciliation).

Instead, Henry Tudor was the embodiment of the rapprochement between York and Lancaster and the means by which the unpopular Richard III could be overthrown. Hence Henry's political importance transcended the weakness of his claim. This is not, of course, to argue that he won the backing of the entire political nation; but he did win vital support from Lancastrians and most of Edward IV's supporters. This was important both in mobilising the crucial military support en route to Bosworth which brought him victory there and in terms of securing the regime upon sufficiently broad support amongst the political nation in the subsequent short and long term. Of course, for the rest of his reign he remained a usurper with limited claim on the natural obedience owed to the legitimate monarch by his nobility (on which, with a very few obvious exceptions, even as disastrous and incompetent a king as Henry VI could rely). However, this did not necessarily make him vulnerable, even in the early years of his reign. The point needs to be remembered that, unlike Edward IV in 1461 and, most obviously, Richard III in 1483, Henry VII did not overthrow a 'legitimate' monarch but, rather, another usurper and, indeed, one whose means of seizing the throne was conspicuous for its bloodletting even in an age weaned on violence.

So, Henry's role in 1485 was very different from that played by pretenders such as Simnel in 1486-87 and Warbeck in 1491-97. They were clearly political pawns (albeit that Warbeck quickly became a free agent) in the hands of ambitious politicians (John de la Pole, earl of Lincoln, and Sir William Stanley) or unscrupulous foreign powers (Margaret of Burgundy, Maximilian of Habsburg and James IV of Scotland). In other words, their role was



nothing more than to satisfy the dubious interests of their backers: they were certainly not the means by which erstwhile enemies could be reconciled and a regicidal usurper could be ousted.

Henry VII's Popularity

The first Tudor monarch was never sufficiently weak or unpopular to support the view that he was vulnerable to being overthrown. Of course, there were times when he may well have been unpopular – and the events of 1489 and 1497, especially this latter year, seem to bear this out – but it would be difficult to argue that he was weak enough to be an easy target for a usurper since he enjoyed a position of relative strength. Neither of his uncles, Jasper Tudor, duke of Bedford, or Thomas Stanley, earl of Derby, were 'Kingmakers' proper; the childless widower Richard III was dead and unmourned by the vast majority of the political nation (especially in the heartland counties of the south where the intrusion of his northern clients had caused so much offence); and there were very few 'super nobles' capable of offering significant support to a rival claimant (for example, Edward Stafford, duke of Buckingham, was seven years old in 1485). Henry VII, by virtue of his multiple inheritances – from Richard III, Edward IV, Elizabeth of York and so on – was infinitely more powerful in terms of land than any of his predecessors had been and any of his nobility were (and the extent of these landholdings enabled him to extend the range and size of local crown affinities). Furthermore, he had received early recognition of his right to rule by the pope, who issued a bull warning those who refuted the legitimacy of Henry VII's claim that they would be excommunicated.

On the surface, this does not seem to square with the fact that in 1487 Henry was obliged to fight a pitched battle at Stoke, with all of its obvious attendant risks, in what looks like a 'Bosworth mark II', in order to keep his throne. Indeed, Professor Loades argues in *Politics and the Nation* that Henry's victory was by no means a foregone conclusion, stating that 'there had been an ominous reluctance to join the royal standard, and even on the field itself a part of the army held back as though unwilling to be committed'. Yet this does not prove that Henry was weak and vulnerable. Given that he enjoyed overwhelming superiority in numbers (with an army at Stoke of 12,000 men, a much larger force than assembled for Richard III at Bosworth) and that the forces arrayed against him included some 4,000 semi-naked 'wild Irish' kerns wielding clubs, is it not more likely that only his vanguard was engaged because he had no need to commit his other forces?

Moreover, the key point, surely, is that he was never deserted or betrayed by those forces which had assembled to fight for him, as happened to Richard III in 1485 when Sir William Stanley joined Henry and Thomas Percy, earl of Northumberland, stood idly by. It may, indeed, be Northumberland to whom Professor Loades was referring when he wrote of 'an ominous reluctance to join the royal standard' since, according to Susan Brigden, 'The earl of Northumberland, with the largest private army in England, moved, not south to aid the King, but north'. Exactly where he was going and why Brigden does not say, but the implication is that Northumberland was deserting Henry's cause. However, this is not necessarily so, for two reasons. First, there was no subsequent fall from grace: Northumberland continued to occupy the militarily sensitive role of Warden of the East and Middle Marches, which would not have been the case had he betrayed his king. Second, it is possible that he was sent to defend the north against a possible Scottish invasion (after all, this was one of the primary functions of the Warden of the East and Middle Marches): although Henry VII had signed a truce with James III in 1486, this had done little to ease the threat of a Scottish incursion because hostility to the English was so entrenched. Henry VII, then, was not in a weak or isolated position.

Popular Enthusiasm

There was little support within the political nation for a rebellion against Henry. During the Wars of the Roses there had been a declining interest from the nobility and leading gentry in engaging in factional conflict and struggles for the crown: the risk of backing the wrong side meant that there was too much to lose. From the high point of 1459-61 when some 55 noble families had been engaged in the conflicts, 18 fought in 1471 and only 12 at Bosworth. Given this sharp decline, it is hard to see where the domestic support for a usurper might have come from. Of course, John de la Pole, earl of Lincoln, rejected Henry's attempts to reconcile him (despite being a Yorkist and a supporter of Richard III he had been made a councillor in 1485) and joined the conspiracy bankrolled by Margaret of Burgundy, Edward IV's sister and a committed Yorkist, to put Lambert Simnel on the throne as 'Edward VI'; but he failed to rally any support from nobles and their retainers (Lord Lovell, the other main noble conspirator, had

joined the conspiracy before Lincoln).

Conversely, when Henry VII fought at Stoke, he could rely upon the retinues of his core supporters, the duke of Bedford, the earl of Derby and the earl of Oxford, as well as a multitude of Midlands gentry. Of course, Henry VII did face a serious rebellion in 1497. However compelling is the case of Ian Arthurson that the Cornish Rebellion was less about taxation than a conspiracy to overthrow Henry and less about Cornwall than a more general rising against Henry's government (which, according to Arthurson, extended north to Devizes, south to Dorchester and east to Winchester), the fact remains that only one noble, James Lord Audley, and 22 gentry were on the side of the rebels. By contrast, the retinues of 18 nobles, more than one third of the nobility, fought at Blackheath for their king and crushed the rebellion.

The only time when significant elements of the political nation became embroiled in a conspiracy against Henry VII was in 1493-95 when Sir William Stanley (Henry's Chamberlain) and others such as Sir Simon Mountford (a leading Warwickshire gentleman) became implicated in a plot in support of Perkin Warbeck (who claimed to be 'Richard IV', the youngest son of Edward IV). However, Henry's agents quickly unravelled the plot and the malcontents were speedily arrested, subjected to a series of 'show trials' and executed in early 1495. Although any conspiracy which involved men who had free access to Henry was a very serious matter, the fact remains that the plot posed no threat to Henry. Whereas in 1487 he was taken completely by surprise by Lincoln's flight, he knew of the involvement of Stanley and others and the real identity of Warbeck before the plot became serious. Indeed, it had been Lincoln's betrayal that made him more vigilant and led to the creation of a network of agents who were able to protect him from conspiracies. As a result of the work of these agents (and the fact that Warbeck was a political pawn with a desultory claim to be the younger of the 'princes in the Tower'), when Warbeck attempted his landing at Deal in Kent in July 1495, in an expedition supported by Margaret of Burgundy and Maximilian of Habsburg, the duke of Burgundy, he was beaten off by local levies. Indeed, this failure to make any headway against a secure Henry VII convinced the Habsburgs that Henry's sharp trade embargo against their increasingly resentful merchants (imposed between 1493 and 1496 to force Maximilian to bring Margaret under control) was too high a price to pay for an objective that had no chance of being achieved. This is why he dropped Warbeck who was then obliged to turn for support to even weaker powers, such as James IV's Scotland (and the Scottish invasion of September 1496 on his behalf was little more than a glorified border raid).

Foreign Powers

Foreign backing from a strong power such as France was a vital component for any realistic attempt on the throne (as Henry's own experience in 1485 made clear) – but only if there was also domestic support and a claimant who was a credible alternative to an unpopular incumbent. (Lambert Simnel had significant foreign support in 1487 but no domestic support because he was not a credible alternative to Henry VII.) Nevertheless, had the French been committed to replacing Henry VII then doubtless the plots against him would have assumed greater significance than they did. However, although Charles VIII contemplated supporting Warbeck to prevent Henry from aiding Brittany against his plans to annex it, by the Treaty of Étampes of October 1492 Henry recognised Charles's claim to the duchy in return for a promise that the French would not support his enemies. More important than Henry's diplomacy, however, was the fact that Charles became preoccupied with pursuing his claim to the kingdom on Naples after 1494.

Without the backing of Europe's major power, would-be kings of England such as Warbeck were forced to rely on the scraps fed to them by the impoverished Habsburgs, the Scots and Margaret of Burgundy (whose resources never seem to have recovered after supporting Lincoln's rising in 1487). Of these, the most serious problem had been Margaret of Burgundy. Yet the strength of Henry's position by 1495, combined with the impact of the trade embargo, persuaded Maximilian that he had better rein in Margaret's independence (which she enjoyed as a result of her dowager lands). The *Intercursus Magnus* of 1496 stipulated that neither government would support the other's pretenders and that if Margaret did not follow this directive she would lose her lands. In fact, it was not until 1498 that she made a genuine reconciliation with Henry, writing to him in September to ask his forgiveness for supporting his enemies. Subsequently, Margaret devoted herself to her proxy Habsburg grandchildren and great-children. Thus it was that Margaret ceased to be politically active five years before her death in November 1503, although news of her demise was doubtless received in England with some sense of relief.

Reducing Regional Power

Henry VII's troubles were still not entirely over. In 1501 Edmund de la Pole, earl of Suffolk (and Lincoln's brother), fled to the Continent to seek the support of Philip of Habsburg against Henry. Again, though, the strength of Henry's position prevailed. Firstly, his financial muscle was enough to keep Maximilian's successor on his side (for example in 1505 he gave a 'loan' of £138,000 to Philip). Secondly, he made sure to neutralise Suffolk's power-base in East Anglia in order to eliminate any risk of a rising by his tenantry. As a result, Suffolk's attempts to rouse his tenants to rebellion were completely extinguished by the earl of Oxford in the autumn of 1501 with large numbers of his adherents being forced to swear bonds for their good conduct. In fact, many de la Pole clients changed their allegiances after 1501 and the region was brought under even closer royal control as many of these sought service with Thomas Howard, earl of Surrey.

Not satisfied with these measures, Henry VII targeted Suffolk's relations: there were a number of executions, including that of Sir James Tyrell, some imprisonments and 17 attainders in the 1504 parliament. Finally, in 1506, by dint of good fortune, a storm blew Philip of Habsburg into seeking the protection of an English port, whereupon Henry was able to press him successfully for the deliverance to the Tower of de la Pole. There he languished until 1513 when, as a security measure in response to Henry VIII's departure on campaign to France, he was executed.

Conclusion

Although Henry continued to face challenges almost up until the end of his reign, he was never truly threatened and from 1499 onwards he had little to fear. This raises the question of why it was, from about this time, that he began his assault upon the English nobility through the arbitrary imposition of bonds and recognizances. Although there is not the space here to address this in much detail, the suggestion is that it came about from a combination of factors. First, there was the realisation that the Cornish rebellion was not just about resentment against an unpopular tax in a distant region. Arthurson has shown how investigations into the causes of the rebellion continued into the early sixteenth century, a sure sign that the government was nervous. Second, his heir, Prince Arthur, died in 1502. Finally, there was the revelation of the 'Calais Conspiracy' of 1504, when captains of the garrison discussed the virtues of Edward Stafford, duke of Buckingham, and Edmund de la Pole, earl of Suffolk, as worthy successors to Henry VII but not Henry, Prince of Wales, coupled with Henry's own illness after 1504. Paradoxically, then, it was at the time when he was most secure from conspiracies that the ever vigilant Henry VII felt the most vulnerable.