

## Henry VII - Out of the Shadows?

*Summarising human personality is a dangerous business. Henry VII is often caricatured as a dour accountant or as an enigmatic, elusive personality. But what of his love of tennis, hunting and his real anxiety in times of crisis? Henry's was a rich, intriguing personality - if we can bring him out of the shadows.*

'Good morning, could you open your cases?'

Like all visitors to the Tower of London I have to be searched. Most people carry small bags. I have two large suit-cases. The security guard looks a little concerned. Just how many cheese and tomato sandwiches does one tourist need?

I open the cases. No sandwiches, but a wig, boots and a long purple robe, crushed velvet with silver brocade. Clearly an explanation is required. 'I'm going to the Education Centre - to, er, play Henry VII.'

It's not a very eloquent explanation but it's enough - or maybe I'm allowed in because I'm wearing a guest's official badge. After that the day becomes easier, just two and a half hours in role as Henry VII, conducting a council meeting with forty A level students as my councillors, proffering advice, arguing with each other, anxious not to offend or anger their stern, unbending monarch.

But was Henry VII stern and unbending? This was the problem I had tackled as I prepared to be Henry. I had to reflect Henry's character and personality because they played a vital part in determining his decisions and actions. Just what kind of man was Henry VII?

### Beginning to Explore

Where shall I start? It's always best to begin with something clear and direct rather than becoming bogged down in the detail of larger books, no matter how good or important they are. Let's begin with Caroline Rogers' Henry VII, written for A level students. (1) Here's Henry - 'painstaking and meticulous attention to detail', 'obsessed with making money' and, despite the best efforts of historians, Henry is still enigmatic, 'a shadowy and elusive personality'. Now let's turn to John Guy's Tudor

England (2), a standard text for university students - and again we have 'sober statesmanship', 'ruthless and severe', 'shadowy and remote', a king who 'kept his distance'.

Is this helpful? These comments suggest consistency amongst historians and it's not encouraging. Playing Henry does not sound a bundle of fun - sober, ruthless, etc. And how do I appear enigmatic? Perhaps I ought to perform in the dark, or maybe in the next room to show a king who keeps his distance!

Time to stop and think. Do two similar descriptions corroborate each other – or could one be, in part, derived from the other, and therefore not a truly independent opinion? I must check when each book was published and their bibliographies to see whether one draws on the other. Secondly, am I reading something contradictory? Can a king really be described as 'shadowy' AND sober, ruthless, meticulous and the rest? This sounds remarkably specific for a supposedly 'shadowy' figure.

Where does the idea of Henry as an enigmatic, shadowy figure come from? Is it derived from contemporary accounts or simply from rather crude contrasts with monarchs whom we think we know at first glance – Richard III, Henry VIII and Elizabeth, respectively murderer, womanising jousting and virginal Gloriana? Yet none of those labels stands up to the most cursory enquiry. All had complex personalities, all, dare I say it, enigmatic! So, where next? More historians or into the primary sources? The problem with reading more historians is that I may become so imbued with their opinions that when I do go to the sources I'll focus only on the elements that support the 'sober and ruthless' interpretation. I need to retain the capacity to think for myself so I'd better jump in the deep end - into the sources to see if Henry emerges from the shadows!

## **Using my Eyes**

Can I learn anything from Henry's portraits, from his clothes, his expression, his pose, any accessories in the picture? What message do portraits try to convey? Michael Sittow painted Henry in 1505 when the king was 48. Like many portraits of this period it might flatter the sitter who was being displayed to a potential groom or bride, in this case Margaret of Austria, daughter of the Emperor Maximilian. (3) Let's look -

Sittow shows us the man described by Spanish ambassadors as prematurely aged by threats of rebellion - the king wears a black bonnet, doublet and gold brocade surcoat lined with fur, and his brown hair is streaked with grey. Richness of dress certainly a rose, that omnipresent Tudor badge, but the eyes and mouth dominate the picture. What adjectives describe that face? Cheerful? Sensual? Scarcely! Is there a slight, grudging smile at best? Does this seem flattering - or accurate?

Torrigiano's bust of Henry VII was one of three sculptures probably undertaken 1509-1511 as a trial for the commission for Margaret Beaufort's tomb, which in turn led to Torrigiano undertaking the tomb of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York. The bust is nearly identical to the effigy on Henry's tomb, which Torrigiano based on Henry's death-mask.

The sculpture could be a different man from the man shown by Sittow were it not for those high cheek-bones and the long nose. (4) The impression is altogether more commanding, decisive, assured. Those dominant eyes are aloof, judging, appraising - aware of the weaknesses of those around him? This man is a ruler. Though later than Sittow's portrait, this is a younger Henry, perhaps as he might have appeared in the early 1490s aged around 35. I can believe this man traded blows with Richard III at Bosworth, an image difficult to conjure from Sittow's painting. This man looks as if he would be interesting to portray in role.

Have I seen anything new here or have I already read too much before looking at these portraits? It would be interesting to give them to people who know nothing about Henry and ask them what adjectives describe the faces they see.

## **Eyewitnesses**

Now for those who met Henry and described him. Polydore Vergil, an Italian scholar who came to England in 1502, wrote a detailed character sketch of the king in his History of England. (5) Vergil sounds like a man remembering his meetings with the king - Henry was 'gracious and kind and was as attentive to his visitors as he was easy of access. His hospitality was splendidly generous.' Vergil clearly respected the 'wise and prudent' king. 'In government he was shrewd and prudent so that no-one dared to get the better

of him through deceit and guile... He well knew how to maintain his royal majesty...’ There’s something ominous and awe-inspiring in those phrases. Is it too fanciful to see those qualities staring out of Torrigiano's sculpture?

Foreign ambassadors were also regular visitors to Henry VII's court and the reports of emissaries from Spain and Milan survive. (6) Their words have much in common with Vergil's. Prudent, wise, cautious are again the adjectives they use to describe Henry and, when the Spanish ambassador asked the King in 1504 why a French ambassador had arrived in London, Henry ‘replied by asking why I wished to know’. Did Henry ask with a smile or with that sideways, knowing, penetrating look portrayed by Torrigiano? Whatever the expression he did then embark on a lengthy discussion.

These sources do seem to provide the evidence to support Rogers’ and Guy’s descriptions of Henry but Vergil and the ambassadors have more to reveal. Reading through the whole of Vergil’s account the words that leap out again and again are ‘fear’ and ‘anxiety’. Henry was ‘struck by great fear’ as Lovell's plot unfolded in 1486, he ‘dreaded’ a wider conspiracy in 1487, Maximilian’s changes of policy provoked ‘fear and despair’ in 1492 and there are many more examples.

Do the ambassadorial letters echo this sense of fear? They do, to some extent. In July 1496 a Florentine merchant reported ‘if fortune allowed some lord of the blood royal to rise and [the king] had to take the field, he would fare badly owing to his avarice; his people would abandon him’. And yet more often, and particularly once the crisis of 1497 is past, ambassadors comment on the peace and order of England. By 1499 a Milanese correspondent is reporting, ‘The king here enjoys good fortune and has nothing to do but to guard and accumulate his own immense treasure’.

Where does the truth lie? Can we trust Vergil’s account? Clearly he had not witnessed Henry’s emotions in the first years of his reign at first hand but his informants, loyal servants of the king such as Christopher Urswick, had no reason to portray the king negatively, unless by exaggerating the dangers they also exaggerated Henry's triumph. Certainly Vergil twice says that the nobility were eager for rebellion, a statement difficult to support in the light of the nobility’s reactions at crucial moments of the reign. Like any historian, Vergil was foreshortening events, focussing predominantly on the dramas of the reign. Therefore we are less likely to hear from him of those

months and years when the king could relax, whereas the ambassadorial letters represent a genuinely contemporary perspective, reporting the atmosphere in specific weeks. If we draw a graph charting the danger to the throne we expect peaks and troughs - and also occasions when the perception of danger was greater than the reality.

However it is easy today, with the advantage of hindsight, to say that the dangers were not so great. After five depositions between 1461 and 1485 and several rebellions in the first ten years of his reign, it is not surprising that Henry's level of anxiety was higher than perhaps the actual threats merited. This was especially true after 1497, perhaps the turning point of the reign. The Scottish war, Warbeck's landing and, most importantly, the Cornish rebellion proved to Henry that this was the time to strengthen, not weaken, his grip. Add to that the death of his son, Arthur, in 1502 and it would be astonishing if Henry had believed that the Tudor hold on the crown was secure. Unlikely events had happened before, not least in 1485. Henry's perspective is most evocatively portrayed by Vergil who explained how the sweating sickness of 1485 'portended...that Henry should only reign in the sweat of his brow'. Now my first thought was that this 'sweat' was the result of Henry's hard labour over his accounts but Vergil continued, 'For from the very start of his reign he began to be harassed by the treachery of his opponents and, assaulted frequently ... he evaded peril not without effort...' The sweat on Henry's brow was the sweat of fear.

Fear was also the motive behind Henry's avarice, another key word in both Vergil's account and in the ambassadorial letters. In 1496 the Florentine merchant already quoted had written 'the king is rather feared than loved and this was due to his avarice'. The King's 'infinite' and 'immense' treasure was frequently noted by Milanese writers and was linked to his security as in 1497 'this kingdom is perfectly stable, by reason first of the king's wisdom, whereof everyone stands in awe, and secondly on account of the king's wealth'. According to Vergil, the years after 1502 were blighted by the king's greed, by the harshness of the financial penalties held over the heads of those who broke his laws and by the 'multitudes of informers' who 'dangled before the king's eyes ways of making money'. However before leaving the subject of avarice it is worth quoting Dominic Mancini, another Italian, in London in 1483, who wrote of Edward IV, 'He was yet so eager for money, that in pursuing it he

acquired a reputation for avarice' (7) Perhaps it was all too easy for a king to acquire a reputation for greed?

In the end these sources show us an anxious but resolute and wise king whose prudence was turned to avarice by the everlasting threats to his crown and his dynasty. However, consistent though this picture is, the same sources reveal other sides to Henry. In 1497 the Milanese ambassador described how he met the king 'fifty miles from London, where his Majesty is accustomed to spend the summer hunting'. Henry 'was adorned with a most rich collar, full of great pearls and many other jewels, in four rows, and in his bonnet he had a pear-shaped pearl, which seemed to me something most rich!' Vergil described Henry's cheerfulness, generosity and graciousness. Hence as I prepare my role I must remember to give Henry these qualities too. Is there other evidence of the lighter side of Henry? And isn't this far too specific a picture to warrant the words 'shadowy and elusive'?

## **The King's Expenses**

A very different source is the King's Privy Purse expenses, miscellaneous items paid for at Henry's personal request. In January 1494, for example, four players (actors) of Essex received £1 in reward, as did the players of Wimborne Minster. Next day the King paid £2 to morris dancers while before the end of the month he had lost £2 at cards and laid out nearly £2 for clothing for Dick the fool, a jester. Here is evidence of an altogether livelier Henry, the generous figure described by Vergil – or is it? Perhaps it is all too easy to pick out a few examples and claim that they prove that Henry was relaxed, jolly, even frivolous.

This source needs approaching far more systematically. How frequently are such payments made? Is the frequency enough to justify conclusions about Henry? Was he making payments because of personal interest or because this was part of the art and show of kingship, creating the image of generosity and wealth and thus strength?

It is time to sit and count. Before me are extracts from the Privy Purse expenses for 1491-1505 published in 1831. (8) I must remember that they are extracts and I have no way of knowing whether this selection is typical of the whole of the original documents, lying deep within the archives. Any conclusions must be limited by this

fact. As I read, I list activities - references to music, jesters etc. - and simply count the entries in each year for each activity. The task takes less than two hours. What have I discovered?

Amidst the few but regular references to tennis, jesters, tumblers, actors and 'disguisings', the frequent expenditure on music stands out. Does this suggest that Henry was fond of music? His purchase of lutes for his daughters, Margaret and Mary, in 1501 and 1505 may support this conclusion but an explanation may also lie in the need to promote a lively, wealthy court. By far the largest sums were spent on jewellery and gold and silver plate, all used to maintain the majesty of the King's appearance.

Even more interesting are numerous examples of what seem to be spontaneous gifts of money, to 'one who brought the king a fresh sturgeon', 'to a woman that presented the king with cherries and strawberries', 'to a poor man that had his corn eaten by the king's deer', five shillings in November 1494 'to a woman for two glasses of water' and, most intriguingly, 'for burying of a man that was slayn in my Lady Grey's chamber'. These do provide objective support for Vergil's subjective view of Henry's graciousness and generosity.

Finally these accounts actually refer to Henry losing money! What can we make of this? Professor Chrimes, apparently using the same sources, in his *Henry VII* says of these entries, 'Prominent is the frequency with which he lost money... he was often a loser...' (9) However I can only find 12 entries recording Henry's losses between 1491 and 1505 - 3 at tennis, 4 at cards, 2 at archery, 2 at chess and 1 at dice. This does not appear to merit the description 'frequent', even if there are more references in the original documents and the king lost on other, unrecorded occasions. Given other evidence, not of Henry's tight-fistedness but of his intelligence, perhaps it would be surprising to find him losing frequently at chess and even at cards.

Is there more evidence to support this lighter image of Henry? In 1993 Steven Gunn published an article on 'The Courtiers of Henry VII'. (10) Using a wide range of evidence, much of it from unpublished manuscripts, he discussed the kinds of people we might more usually expect to find jousting or dancing at the courts of Henry VIII or Elizabeth.

How did ambitious courtiers win Henry's favour? Not, apparently, by engaging the king in conversation on the finer points of accountancy but, as in 1498, by presenting Henry with gifts of hawks and greyhounds. Henry was so fond of hunting that he kept at least five falconers on his chamber staff and as late as September 1507 (when he was 50) he went hawking or hunting every day, albeit not always with outstanding success. In July that year he shot a farmyard cock by mistake!

Another route to Henry's favour was through the tiltyard. The gentlemen of Henry's household were 'gentlemen', trained with horse and lance. Some, at least, were frequent, even obsessive jousters in front of Henry who, Gunn says, 'sponsored, watched and judged such exercises with enthusiasm'. These were the men, the 'king's true knyghtes', Henry sent to lead embassies abroad. Other monarchs expected courtiers to represent kings, not ink-encrusted bureaucrats, vital though they were as members of embassies. Henry too knew that his prestige depended on that combination of show and brains provided by his courtiers and his councillors.

### **Out of the shadows?**

Is Henry an enigma? Perhaps the descriptions such as 'shadowy and elusive' are in part the result of our need to sum people up in a few words, a habit that reduces human beings to caricatures. Think about people you know, teachers for example! Do they really spend all their spare time with red pens in their hands just as Henry VII is supposed to have pored over his account books? Is their professional ferocity with Year Nine representative of their whole personality?

There are other sources and plenty of other books giving historians' views on Henry that I have not had space to discuss. As I prepare myself to impersonate Henry I need to remember the king in a variety of moods and to work out which of those were dominant at particular times. The key words may be intelligence, opportunism, anxiety, security, caution, dynasty, but there is much more and this seems a far more interesting role to play than it did when I began reading.

Perhaps the best way to end is with a kaleidoscope of images of Henry VII, sufficient to suggest that Henry is far from being a shadowy and elusive figure – of Henry in Brittany in 1484, riding in disguise at breakneck speed to escape pursuers who would

hand him over to Richard III; deciding not to execute Simnel but ordering the deaths of Warbeck and Warwick; mourning the deaths of his sons and his wife; losing £9 at cards at Taunton the night before he met the captured Warbeck; applauding jousts, musicians, tumblers; laughing at jesters; living in fear of rebellion but showing the face of majesty to his subjects and foreign emissaries; sentimentally sending gifts in 1502 to Vannes, the town in Brittany that had sheltered him in exile; hesitating over decisions; listening to advice from Morton, Fox, Bray and others and changing his mind; enjoying the intellectual challenge of negotiations with ambassadors and enjoying winning the upper hand; at Bosworth, desperately fending off Richard's attack for longer than his companions had thought him capable; dating his reign the day before Bosworth so that those who fought against him would be traitors; consulting astrologers; rewarding those who had kept him company in exile or who had served his family or those who entertained him on progress, often people of no social standing; ordering that even loyal servants should be bound by bonds to obey his laws; hunting day after day, even early in his reign, in preference to discussing business; initialling his accounts page by page after failing eye-sight stopped him initialling each item; a prematurely aged king increasingly convinced that no-one could be fully trusted; counting his treasure . . .

Is that how you see Henry VII - and where does the balance lie and how did the balance change as the years went by?

## References

1. C.Rogers, Henry VII, 1991.
2. J.Guy, Tudor England, 1988.
3. For the portraiture of Henry VII in general see R. Strong, Tudor and Jacobean Portraits, 2 vols., HMSO, 1969.
4. The most detailed discussion of Torrigiano's sculpture is C.Galvin and ELindley, 'Pietro Torrigiano's portrait bust of Henry VII' in The Burlington Magazine, vol. 130, 1988.

5. Vergil's account of Henry VI's reign can be found in D.Hay (ed.) , *The Anglica Historia of Polydore Vergil AD 1485-1537*, Camden Society, LXXIV, 1950.
6. *Calendar of State Papers, Milan*, HMSO, 1912, *Calendar of State Papers, Spain*, HMSO, 1862.
7. C.A.J.Armstrong (ed.), *The Usurpation of Richard III*, 2nd ed. 1969, p.67.
8. S.Bentley, *Excerpta Historica*, 1831. For a fuller discussion see S.Anglo, 'The Court Festivals of Henry VII' in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, xliii, 1960-1.
9. S.B.Chrimes, *Henry VII*, 1972, p.306. Chrimes' concluding chapter 'The King's Grace' is well worth reading, providing a much fuller discussion than could Rogers and Guy.
10. S.J.Gunn, 'The Courtiers of Henry VII' in *English Historical Review*, 108, 1993.

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