

Henry VII: Miracle King

By [Gordon Marsden](#)

Published in [History Today](#) Volume 59 Issue 3 March 2009
[Tudor](#), [Medieval](#) [Henry VII](#)

Henry Tudor invoked providence to gain his throne in 1485, but it was skilful use of heraldic and religious imagery, as well as promotion of the cult of Henry VI that ensured he retained it. In this Tudor anniversary year, Gordon Marsden looks at the miraculous reign of a clever king.

This year's 500th anniversary of Henry VIII's accession to the throne will inevitably be marked by celebrations of his life of which the old egomaniac himself would heartily have approved. But his father, Henry Tudor (1457-1509), founder of the Tudor Age, whose tenacity enabled his 17-year-old son to come peacefully into his inheritance in April 1509, richly deserves attention at this anniversary moment too.

Cold, materialistic, miserly and rapacious are some of the traditional characteristics associated with this king. The calculating, slightly haunted gaze staring from his 1505 portrait seems to embody Henry's attention to detail in entrapping his subjects with levies and fines, a trait highlighted by biographers from Francis Bacon onwards. Yet this is to overlook another side of Henry, which Bacon also noted: the providential character of Henry's life and times. As David Starkey notes in his recent biography of the young Henry VIII: 'The story of how Henry Tudor survived against the odds, and won his throne and bride against even greater odds, is one of the world's great adventures.'

That story is part of a sequence of good fortune that enabled Henry first to survive and then to capture the English crown. But the tale of how he then used prophecies, heraldic and religious imagery, Providence and the miraculous to boost both his own self-belief and that of his subjects in his new Tudor dynasty is equally compelling.

Everyone in 15th-century Europe saw Providence as playing some role in success or failure of the events taking place around them. The Wars of the Roses, during which the wheel of fortune kept Henry Tudor in exile for 14 years, were a case in point. The miraculous vision of three suns in the sky, which appeared to Edward IV before his victory over the Lancastrians at Mortimer's Cross in February 1461, was used by the king both as an instant sign of favour from God and as an enduring device symbolising his approval of the Yorkist cause in a heraldic emblem. As Colin Richmond has suggested, a generation of civil conflict may have made the role of religious and secular propaganda more important when traditional loyalties were challenged by rival claimants and swift reversals of fortune: a situation Henry VII, both as claimant and king, knew well.

Henry's physical survival, before his defeat of Richard III at Bosworth in August 1485, alone gave him a strong claim to the title of Miracle King. His mother, Margaret Beaufort (1443-1509), the great-granddaughter of John of Gaunt, was of royal blood but only by a bastard line. But for the Beauforts' subsequent legitimisation by the Lancastrian crown, Henry Tudor would have been unable to make any claim to the throne. The other slender link to the House of Lancaster came via Henry's Welsh grand- father, Owen Tudor, and his clandestine marriage to Henry Vs widow, Catherine of Valois. It was left to Henry VI to reha- bilitate his half-brothers, Owen's sons Edmund and Jasper, by making them earls of Richmond and Pembroke respectively at the start of the Wars of the Roses.

Margaret Beaufort's marriage to Edmund in 1455 was brief and she was left a widow at the age of 13 and six months pregnant when her husband died, probably of the plague, in Yorkist captivity.

She gave birth to Henry Tudor, her only child, in January 1457 while sheltering in Pembroke Castle under Jasper's protection. It was a difficult delivery which both mother and son were lucky to survive.

In the years up to 1485, providence kept Henry and his royal claim alive time and again. Removed from his mother in 1462 by Edward IV's victorious Yorkists, Henry was only reunited with her briefly when Henry VI's regime was restored for a few months in 1470-71. The sole surviving Lancastrian claimants after the bloodbaths of Barnet (April 1471) and Tewkesbury (May 1471), both Henry Tudor and Jasper were lucky to escape with their lives into exile in Brittany from the Yorkist siege of Pembroke Castle. Henry's position in France was constantly precarious - in 1476 he narrowly escaped Edward IV's agents, fleeing to sanctuary in St Malo. Even in 1483, when he planned to join the Buckingham rebellion against Richard III, clouds of defeat became his silver lining. The bad weather that precipitated Buckingham's failure prevented Henry's ship from landing - an event which may have resulted in capture and death.

The circumstances of Henry's victory at Bosworth against Richard III's much larger force justify Sean Cunningham's assessment that 'Henry was delivered to his destiny by the slenderest of margins and God's providence'. A last-gasp charge by Richard himself came perilously close to killing Henry. As the November 1485 Parliament acknowledged, Henry's right to rule had been endorsed by divine will in the outcome of the battle.

It is one thing to win a crown, another to keep it. The new king was acutely aware of how Providence had unravelled Edward IV's seemingly secure settlement with the usurpation by his brother Richard and the disappearance of his sons into the Tower. Henry Tudor would need all the assistance that presentation and propaganda might offer alongside the arts of patronage, financial security and diplomacy. This meant emphasising those aspects of his story that could help him both gain allegiance and keep it: his lineage, his relatives and his Welshness.

Without the dogged loyalty shown from the 1460s onwards by his uncle Jasper and John de Vere, the warrior Earl of Oxford, Henry would never have got to Bosworth. He knew it, and as king the pivotal roles he awarded both men reflected this. Jasper Tudor's power base in west Wales gave his nephew the essential springboard to confront Richard III. Owen Tudor's love match with Catherine of Valois would have led nowhere in garnering Welsh support had not the national sentiment been kept alive by the bards after Owen Glendower's revolt in 1400 against Henry IV's English rule. Jasper was particularly well placed to do this. As a patron of the bards since the 1450s, he attracted the title of *mah darogan* (son of Prophecy), a title which then transferred to his nephew in his challenge to the English usurper. Henry was cast in the role of a returning avenger by bards like Dafydd Llwyd of Mathafarn, who denounced Richard III as murderer of the princes in the Tower, 'the hang-lipped Saracen slaying the angels of Christ'. Henry could also be seen as the fulfiller of prophecy as the last of the line of Brutus, legendary founder of the British race, and Cadwallader, king of the Britons.

Henry's meandering march in 1485 from his landing place at Milford Haven through the north and west of Wales gave him time to exploit such sentiments, promising also to restore Welsh liberties. It helped win him the pivotal adherence of Rhys ap Thomas of Carmarthen and gave him a clear run into England to challenge Richard. The red dragon of Cadwallader unfurled on Henry's banner at Bosworth was to become a key motif of the new Tudor iconography. Henry even established a commission of genealogists to trace his descent. According to the Welsh antiquarian, David Powell, writing in 1584, 'they drew his perfect geneologie from the ancient kings of Brytaine and princes of Wales'.

Henry did not just enlist the past to justify his dynasty. He also grafted it onto its future. His marriage in 1486 to Edward IV's daughter Elizabeth was an act symbolised in the new icon of unification between the two warring dynasties, the red and white Tudor rose. But this took place only after Henry's coronation in his own right as the heir of the House of Lancaster. And, when Elizabeth speedily produced their first child, a son, Henry made sure he was born in Winchester,

ancient capital of Saxon England but also the supposed site of Camelot. He gave him the name of Britain's greatest mythhero and king - Arthur. His son could now be the returning king, uniting nations, races and dynasties, born in the town where the 'original' Round Table still hangs inside the castle. All this also sent out a message to Henry's fellow European rulers: his dynasty was now invested with the aura of one of Christendom's immortal heroes.

Arthur's premature death in 1502 cruelly mocked all Henry's hopes, however, and heightened his sense of dynastic vulnerability. He was still assailed by Yorkist conspiracies after nearly two decades and now had only one male heir, the 10year-old Henry.

Throughout all the crises of his reign, the Miracle King drew constantly on the support of his miracle mother. Margaret Beaufort put her life on the line for Henry in the 1483 plot in support of his claim that could easily have ended in her execution. Henry repaid her devotion by giving her political responsibilities and substantial estates. The surviving correspondence of mother and son is described by Starkey as 'more like the letters of two lovers'. Margaret signs off one letter to Henry on his birthday:

My dearest and only desired joy in the world ... at Calais town, this day of St Agnes, that I did bring into the world my good and gracious prince, king and only beloved son.

That last phrase and parallels evoking the Virgin Mary's relationship with her son may not be accidental. In an age saturated with instances of devotion to the Virgin, both Henry and Margaret were patrons of her long-established cult. Margaret, like Mary, had borne her child without a human father present and at a very early age - the same age as the Roman saint Agnes was martyred. Just as Mary and Jesus had escaped the massacre of innocents by King Herod, so Henry's exile had preserved him from a new Herod, Richard III, who was guilty, as the attainder of the 1485 Parliament put it, of 'the shedding of infants' blood' on his way to kingship.

We know that Henry acknowledged the aid of the Virgin at key crises during his reign: he presented his battle standards from Bosworth in her honour at St Paul's and dedicated public prayers to her after crushing both the Yorkists at Stoke in 1487 and the Cornish rebels at Blackheath in 1497. The fervency of his devotion to her is conveyed in his will:

I trust by the special grace and mercy of thy most blessed Mother ever Virgin ... to whom in all my necessities I have made my continual refuge and by whom I have hitherto in all my adversities, ever had my special comfort and relief.

Both Henry and his mother promoted new devotions too. Margaret Beaufort championed devotion to the Name of Jesus, introduced by Bernardino of Siena in the 1420s, and obtained papal permission to be the society's official patron in England. This is reflected in the titles of two of the Cambridge colleges on which she lavished patronage, Jesus and Christ's. Henry incorporated images of two Breton saints - Vincent and Armel from his private devotions as an exile into the iconography of the new chapel he built in 1503 in Westminster Abbey. Armel, to whom Henry had prayed during the Channel storms of 1483 and again in 1485 for safe landing in Wales, had his feast day added to the Church calendar in 1498.

Both Henry and Margaret promoted in English churches the Scala Coeli devotion with an associated indulgence. This was originally linked to a chapel in Rome and an alleged vision where St Bernard saw angels on a ladder carrying up souls from Purgatory into Heaven. The Scala Coeli devotion in England first appeared at the altar of St Mary de la Puwe at Westminster in 1476, but Henry and his mother gave it a boost in the 1490s. Margaret Beaufort established a chantry at St Mary de la Puwe in 1494. Henry asked the papacy to transfer the Scala Coeli to St George's Chapel, Windsor, which was granted in 1496; and in 1504 he asked Pope Julius II to move the indulgence back from Windsor to Westminster in conjunction with his new plans to be buried there instead.

Why was the staircase to Heaven caught up in Henry's 'shuttle piety' about his last resting place? The answer lies in a final piece of the miracle jigsaw that helped to strengthen his dynasty - the cult of his murdered Lancastrian halfuncle, Henry VI.

Almost immediately after his death in the Tower in May 1471 - probably on the orders of Edward IV and enacted by his brother, the future Richard III - Henry VI became the subject of popular veneration. The official version that he had died of 'pure melancholy' was contradicted when his body 'bled on the pavement' in St Paul's and gave way rapidly to a miracle-related cult regarding him as a martyr. As one contemporary verse put it:

A prince thou wert, meek and benign, patient in adversity. Wherefore thou hast a crown worthy. In bliss of all felicity ...

By the late 1470s Henry VI's image was already being venerated in York Minster. Its political overtones led Edward IV to have it proscribed, but the cult persisted. One of the intercessory miracles recorded how a certain boy ... submerged in a water mill was by the invocation of the blessed Henry VI revived from the dead'. It dates from 1481, two years before Edward IV's death. Richard III, in an attempt to depoliticise the cult and expiate the sin of regicide, had Henry VI's body moved from Chertsey Abbey to a prestigious tomb in the new St George's Chapel at Windsor in August 1484.

Henry VII did not invent the cult of Henry VI, but he certainly saw its value to his kingship and did everything in his power to promote it. This included a determined lobbying campaign to successive popes to have his uncle formally proclaimed a saint. The explosion of the cult after 1485 is evident in a variety of media: panel paintings, woodcuts and engravings, as well as the miracle reports collected to provide evidence for canonisation.

Hundreds of Henry VI pilgrim badges survive, mostly dating from 1490 to 1500, the decade when Henry VII was battling hardest to resist conspiracies by the Yorkist pretender Perkin Warbeck, who claimed to be 'Richard IV, the younger of the princes in the Tower.

According to Richard Marks' painstaking study, church panel images of Henry VI, as well as testaments for proxy pilgrimages to his shrine, seem particularly numerous in East Anglia. Is it just possible that this is linked to the influence of Henry VII's faithful lieutenant the Earl of Oxford across the area after 1485?

Whether or not the accounts of the 'meekness and Good Life of Henry VI' are entirely a product of a Tudor canonisation campaign, what mattered to Henry VII's contemporaries was that the cult sat easily alongside previous precedents of English rulers meeting violent deaths who were venerated as a result. This included the ninth-century East Anglian king St Edmund, seen alongside Henry VI in several of the church screens in the area and at whose shrine the young Henry VI is shown kneeling in a 1430s' manuscript.

What emerges from all of this is what Ralph Griffiths describes as 'Henry VII's desire to have a saint in the family to buttress his new regime'. In his mother's royal charter of 1505 for Christ's College, Cambridge, it is made very clear that she wishes to complete the foundation for the love she bore for the martyr and, as her biographers put it, 'her confidence in his sanctity'. Legitimising the Tudors by reference to this can be traced back to the start of Henry VII's reign with the 1486 Worcester pageant put on for him, including a figure representing his Lancastrian predecessor to welcome him:

I am Henry VI, sober and sad Thy grete uncle, sometye of England king ... Slaine was I, Martir by great tormenting ...

The renewed campaign in the last decade of Henry VII's life to link him with the martyred Henry VI was not just realpolitik but part of his scheme for personal salvation in the hereafter. This began

with plans in the 1490s to site his and Henry VI's tombs together in St George's Chapel, Windsor, literally embedding the Tudor dynasty alongside its saintly predecessor. A major building programme planned for a new Lady chapel and chantry there was accompanied by a sustained PR campaign to boost Henry VI's veneration at Windsor. Special indulgences were obtained for pilgrims to Windsor. One of the Henry VI miracle stories records how mariners bringing stones from Caen for the new chapel conveniently escaped pirates by invoking 'Good King Henry'. But when a 1498 Star Chamber inquiry concluded from witnesses that Henry VI had wished Westminster to be his final resting place, Henry VII made plans for his new chapel to be sited at the east end of the Abbey instead.

As it stands today, that chapel is dominated by the masterpiece tombs of Henry VII and his wife, with their double Renaissance-style effigies by the Florentine Piero Torrigiano, and that of his mother alongside. However, we do know that Pope Julius II finally granted the king's petitions to move Henry VI's relics from Windsor to Westminster in May 1504. At that point the first stone of the new Westminster chapel had been laid, the Scah Coeli indulgence had moved back from Windsor and a shrine for Henry VI, once canonised, was clearly intended. A drawing of a canopied funerary monument also exists inscribed 'the monument intended for king Henry the Sixte', though perhaps this was a design simply for a tomb, when plans for a canonisation and shrine ran into the sands after 1509.

The chapel was filled with extraordinarily elaborate stained glass, now sadly lost. It was stuffed with all the heraldic emblems of Henry VII imprinted, like modern logos, in glass, stone and bronze, and even on the liturgical vestments bequeathed by Henry to the convent of Westminster. This emphasis on heraldry to imprint the new regime indelibly in people's minds can be seen in the schemes for Henry's palaces at Richmond and Sheen. Alongside the cult of Henry VI it was a potent combination to ward off doubts about title and succession and underlining that God's providence for the Tudors was here to stay.

All new regimes that come suddenly to power need a narrative to explain and sustain them. Henry VII proved a master at this. But his initiatives, including the promotion of Henry VI, were not simple cynical spin. Henry Tudor had every reason to revere the man who had legitimised his family and to project himself as that man's avenging successor, however carefully that had to be orchestrated with reconciliation to Yorkists after 1485. Polydore Vergil, the Italian humanist who became Henry's court historiographer, provides the account of a meeting in October 1470 between a 13-year-old Henry and Jasper and the restored Henry VI. His alleged reference to future Tudor greatness is turned by Shakespeare into verse prophecy (Henry VI, Part 3):

Come hither England's hope - This pretty lad will prove our country's bliss ... His head by nature framed to wear a crown.

All this suited Tudor propaganda but it was also rooted in Henry's VII's real life experiences, in his prayers and sense of his place in the universe. The ability for 15th-century political figures to enmesh their worldly and spiritual needs with the urgency of salvation was not unique to Henry VII. Recent scholarship has shown how even Richard III's private religious life was a fervent, complex mix of paranoia and fits of puritanical conscience.

Yet Henry VII's piety and politics were more of a piece than the schizophrenic excesses of Richard III and others. The king's declining health in the last six years of his life intensified his reflection on what he still needed to do to secure his dynasty. Hence the swift betrothal of Arthur's widow Katherine of Aragon to Prince Henry to keep Spain committed to the Tudors. But Henry had to secure his soul as well as his successor. What Starkey has called his 'reign of fiscal terror' - bonds and other fiscal exactions to pressure his nobility into staying loyal - also lay heavily on his conscience.

By the standards of his time, the king was remarkably merciful in dealing with those who threatened his throne. Even the persistent Perkin Warbeck was given several chances. Only

Spanish insistence on all pretenders being removed before sanctioning Katherine of Aragon's marriage to Arthur led to Perkin Warbeck's execution, as well as that of the innocent and real Yorkist heir, the Earl of Warwick, in 1499.

Warwick's judicial murder was one of the blots on Henry's conscience as he approached his final years. Recurrent serious illnesses in the springs of 1507 and 1508 led to a final three months penance from February to April 1509. Henry's piety became intense and in his final 27-hour death agonies he heard the special Mass of the Virgin, embraced the crucifix and finally called on the Name of Jesus, that special devotion of which his mother was patron.

How should we judge the success of rulers, be they medieval or modern? One way is to look at what they started with and how they ended up. Henry Tudor began with nothing, winning the throne and holding on to it for a quarter of a century during which time seldom a year went by without a threat of some sort. By those criteria he really does deserve the title of Miracle King. Complex and skilful diplomacy, attention to financial detail, the still underrated but vital support of men like his uncle Jasper and the Earl of Oxford all played their part. But so did the way his kingship was buttressed by skilful image-making, visual and verbal, and the arts of prophecy and propaganda, all the more potent because of Henry's fervent belief in them. Perhaps the greatest miracle was the one he conjured up for his deathbed: to the naturally, with a full treasury and three surviving children to be linked to the other royal dynasties of Europe.

Without the prudence and wisdom Polydore Vergil gave as Henry's epitaph 'his mind was brave and resolute and never, even at moments of greatest danger deserted him' - there would have been none of the larger-than-life glories or follies of the Henry VIII who succeeded him. Reflecting on how the son used the father's inheritance, some may well wonder which Henry really deserves the accolades in this Tudor anniversary year.

Gordon Marsden is MP for Blackpool South and was Editor of History Today from 1985-97.