

Life at Henry VII's Court

Although he looked rather like a medieval miser, Henry VII attracted to his Court some of the best minds of the Renaissance

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WHenever intellectual life at Henry VII's court is discussed, invidious comparisons are made with his son's establishment. Invariably the father comes off second-best, looking like an old miser: too penurious to promote the arts, too concerned with his own safety to foster carefree attitudes at court, and too practical to enjoy music, dancing, and festival. Often he is associated in the mind with a dour, sombre-hued character straight out of the Middle Ages, while his son represents the typically brave new world of Renaissance. The contrast is one of light versus shadow. If there is some truth that the first Tudor inhabited the shadows, there is also a truth that he emerged frequently enough from the secrecy surrounding his policy to be observed enjoying hunting, tennis, dicing, and court revels. The courtiers that he gathered about him included some of the finest European poets, humanists, historians, and scientists of his age—men who came in contact with the future Henry VIII, often as his tutors, the men most responsible for forming Henry VIII's liberal attitude to intellect that without scholars 'we should scarcely exist at all'.

If we wish to understand the intellectual climate of Henry VII's court we must examine Henry's cultural and athletic pursuits, the circle of educated men at court, the education of his children, and his reputation as a builder. We must remember that Henry VII was an avid hunter, that he enjoyed the company of intellectuals—Erasmus as well as Baldassare Castiglione appeared at his court—and that his own cultural pursuits are best reflected in the training given to his children, a training that made them proficient in dancing, music, the arts, languages, and theological disputation.

Though not as demonstrably athletic as his son, Henry enjoyed the traditional aristocratic recreations. We have no evidence that he endangered the royal person by jousting or wrestling at the barriers, but he played tennis and hunted with gusto. His body was well proportioned for the athletic demands of his favourite sports. Polydore Vergil, the royal historiographer, described Henry in his mid-forties as 'slender but well built and strong; his height above the average. His appearance was remarkably attractive and his face was cheerful, especially when speaking; his eyes were small and blue, his teeth few, poor and blackish; his hair was thin and white; his complexion sallow. His spirit was distinguished, wise and prudent; his mind was brave and resolute and never, even at moments of the greatest danger, deserted him'. Obviously, physical decay had set in, and a King who should have been in his prime was well beyond it. After 1499, for example, there is not a single reference to tennis in the Treasurer of the Chamber's Accounts, and we must suspect that the forty-two-year-old King put aside his racquet with advancing age and increasing physical disabilities. He hunted sparingly in his last years. When bodily vigour returned, as it did briefly in 1507, he hunted again, but his good health was short-lived. During his last three years, he was afflicted by severe attacks of tuberculosis, and the last attack killed him.

Coupled with his respiratory ailment was failing sight. Whether his vision had been ruined by the close work of checking accounts, or was the customary far-sightedness that accompanies advanced age, is difficult to tell. In one of Henry's

infrequent letters, we have touching testimony to his visual problem and a testament to his maternal devotion. He wrote to his mother, Margaret Beaufort, about her proposed collegiate foundation at Cambridge and her French property and concluded by saying:

'Madame I have encombred you now with thys my longe wrytings, but me thyngks that I can doo no less, considering that hit is so selden that I do wryte, wherfore I beseeche you to pardon me, for verrayly Madame my syghte is nothing so perfitt as it has ben; and I know well hit will appayre (impair) dayly; wherfore I trust that you will not be displesed though I wryte not so often with myne owne hand, for on my fayth I have ben three dayes or I colde make an ende of this Letter.'

Aside from revealing the wretched state of Henry's eyesight, the letter discloses something about the nature of his relationship to his mother. The old notion that he honoured her more than his wife and Queen, Elizabeth of York, though not explicitly stated, seems implicitly implied. Credence for this view certainly can be found in the report of one of King Ferdinand's diplomatic agents, who noted as early as 1488, that Elizabeth 'is a "very noble woman", and much beloved. She is kept in subjection by the mother of the King. It would be a good thing to write often to her, and show her a little love.'

Henry had a high regard for learning. Polydore Vergil, the Italian who found favour with Henry and became his historian, tells us that his sovereign 'was not devoid of scholarship'. Henry loved books, and had a considerable library. It was there, according to the old tale, that he assuaged Catherine of Aragon's grief at the departure of her Spanish retinue for Spain. Seeing her tear-stained face and ascertaining the cause, Henry gently led Catherine to his library where he showed her many books written in Latin and English. Catherine's spirits soared when she saw them and saw that the world of books was not foreign to the English. Possibly the community and commonality of scholarship touched both. There is an interesting postscript to the story. Seeing Catherine's dry eyes, Henry called for his jeweller and grandly offered her first choice from a bag of gems, precious stones, and pretty baubles; the remainder he divided among the Spanish ladies.



By courtesy of the Dean and Chapter
HENRY VII, 1485-1509, from a panel in the South Quire aisle,
St. George's Chapel, Windsor

The Chamber Accounts contain many references to players and musicians that illustrate Henry's abiding interest in an incipient theatre and in music. The Queen's Players and the dramatic crews of various noblemen appear frequently. The names of the composers William Newark and William Cornyshe are also there.

Harpers, bagpipe players, and poets receive their due. Perhaps the Welsh affinity for poetical speech and appreciation of the poetic impulse ran deep in him. An Italian, a poet, receives a reward; another 'the rymmer of Scotland,' probably Dunbar, also gets one. Then, we find the 'queen moder's poet', possibly Skelton, receiving as well as other unnamed, unsung poets, such as a Welshman who once made a rhyme.

As his illustrious granddaughter, Elizabeth I, Henry felt himself tied to history. Where she had her Lambard, the antiquarian, who presented her with his writings on the state of Britain, he had an unknown chronicler whom he recompensed for writing 'a cotype of a rolle of diverse kinges'. He also had Polydore Vergil who wrote one of the few contemporary accounts of Henry. Like Elizabeth, who had a royal astrologer, Dr. John Dee, Henry had the Italian astrologer, William Parron. Parron achieved great favour with Henry who permitted him to print his annual prognostications for the years 1498, 1500, 1502, and 1503. Unfortunately Parron prophesied in his almanac for 1503 that Henry's wife Elizabeth would live to be eighty. She died suddenly and unexpectedly on February 11th, 1503 at the age of thirty-seven, nine days after the birth of a stillborn girl. Henry never forgave Parron his miscalculation; at least we may infer this, for Parron disappears abruptly from view.

If Henry was superstitious beyond contemporary belief, he was far more religious as well. The dramatic story of his converting a heretic at the stake and then letting him burn, needs no retelling. Henry went on a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Walsingham, fostered a special devotion to the Virgin, and took an interest, like James IV of Scotland, in a crusade against the Turk. In fact, he turned increasingly to religion in times of stress. For example, during the critical year 1499, when he feared rebellion from every side, de Ayala, the Spanish Ambassador, reported in March that: 'The King is growing very devout. He has heard a sermon every day during Lent, and has continued his devotions during the rest of the day.' When in failing health during the last three years of his life, he repeatedly went to mass. He paid to have more and more of them sung for himself and his family. The thought



By courtesy of the Trustees of the National Portrait Gallery
ELIZABETH OF YORK, Queen to Henry VII; cast from the
gilded tomb in Westminster Abbey

lingered, for in his will he decreed no less than 10,000 for the salvation of his immortal soul.

Henry assembled an impressive array of scholars and notables at his court, favouring the foreign-born rather than native English. His doctor and his chaplain were Italians. Silvestro Gigli, whom he sent as his diplomatic agent to Rome, and Pietro Carmeliano, his Latin Secretary, were as well. His librarian was Quintin Poulet, a native of the castellany of Lille, in Flanders. Bernard André, the blind poet, who was employed by Henry VII as his historian, came from Toulouse. Henry had great faith in André, who jotted down an annalistic account of



Photo: Eric de Maré (Gordon Frazer Gallery, Ltd)

The death mask of King Henry VII is the only part of his funeral effigy that has survived; from Westminster Abbey

the last decade of Henry's reign, and wrote occasional verses to celebrate important court events. He summed up Henry's career in a poem entitled *Les Douze Triomphes de Henry VII* in which he praised Henry as a fifteenth-century hero comparable to the legendary Hercules.

Besides employing foreigners in his household, Henry used them as diplomatic agents and welcomed them as visiting scholars. The humanist, Cornelio Vitelli, as well as Erasmus, appeared at court and then, presumably with the King's blessing, went to Oxford to teach. Not unnaturally Henry's favouritism aroused English animosities. The Spanish resident in England candidly noted in 1498 that: 'The King (Henry VII) has the greatest desire to employ foreigners, but cannot do so for the envy of the English is diabolical.'

But the English court was adorned by leading English scholars as well as foreign visitors. There

were the tutors to the royal children, John Skelton and Thomas Linacre. Then, too, Henry VII consulted John Colet of Oxford, the future Dean of St. Paul's and critical commentator on the Epistles of St. Paul. Occasionally, William Grocyn, William Lily, and William Latimer also contributed humanistic light at the English court. Both William Warham, Henry VII's Chancellor, and Richard Fox, his Lord Privy Seal, were sometime patrons. Thomas More did not always get along well with the King and spoke out against the granting of a royal subsidy in the Parliament of 1504; but before that date we find him gathering with other scholars at Eltham. For example, we have Erasmus's vivid account of his visit to More in 1499 to meet Prince Henry:

'I was staying at Lord Mountjoy's country house when Thomas More came to see me, and took me out with him for a walk as far as the next village, where all the King's children, except Prince Arthur, who was then the eldest son were being educated. When we came into the hall, the attendants not only of the palace but also of Mountjoy's household were all assembled. In the midst stood Prince Henry now nine years old, and having already something of royalty in his demeanour, in which there was a certain dignity combined with singular courtesy. On his right was Margaret about eleven years of age, afterwards married to James, King of Scots; and on his left Mary, a child of four. Edmund was an infant in arms. More, with his companion Arnold, after paying his respects to the boy Henry, the same that now is King of England, presented him with some writing. For my part, not having expected anything of the sort, I had nothing to offer, but promised that on another occasion I would in some way declare my duty towards him. Meantime I was angry with More for not having warned me, especially as the boy sent me a little note, while we were at dinner, to challenge something from my pen. I went home, and in the Muses' spite from whom I had been so long divorced, finished the poem within three days.'

Erasmus made two visits to England during Henry's lifetime. The first in, 1499, was a brief sojourn, the second, from 1504-1506, a somewhat more extended stay, was spent teaching at Oxford. His comment about his experience there is not without relevance to the intellectual quality of Henry's court, for the men he praised spent time there as well as at Oxford. Erasmus recollected that:

'I have found in Oxford,' he wrote, 'so much

polish and learning that now I hardly care about going to Italy at all, save for the sake of having been there. When I listen to my friend Colet it seems like listening to Plato himself. Who does not wonder at the wide range of Grocyn's knowledge? What can be more searching, deep and refined than the judgment of Linacre? When did Nature mould a temper more gentle, endearing and happy than the temper of Sir Thomas More?'

The men Erasmus praised were in the vanguard of the English humanists who were reforming education at both the secondary and university level. Colet refounded St. Paul's School. Grocyn taught Greek at Oxford. More translated a Latin biography of Pico Della Mirandola and other assorted works. All were interested in the revived study of Plato and the impact of neo-Platonic views upon politics and education. They were concerned, as was Erasmus and Lorenzo Valla, with going back to the sources—to the establishing of critical canons for judgement. They believed in a higher standard of scholarship than had hitherto been possible. And like Erasmus, their scholarship illumined contemporary problems, such as that of corruption in the Church, for which they recommended a return to the purer, less complicated view of Christ and the early Church Fathers.

Perhaps a good test of Henry VII's interest in education and culture is found in the education he provided for his children. Its principal elements included foreign languages, the classics, music, religion, and, for want of a better term, the art of being a courtier, which included skill at arms and the ability to dance and discourse gracefully. Royal daughters as well as royal sons were instructed; Margaret Tudor practised penmanship, music, and dancing, while her younger sister Mary, a skilful dancer herself, studied French, Latin, music and embroidery. Their brothers, Arthur and Henry, especially Arthur as the heir apparent, received more rigorous training as befitted Christian princes.

Of the two boys, Arthur was reputed to be the better student, though Henry's scholastic achievements were by no means inconsiderable. Bernard André, the blind poet who became Arthur's tutor in the latter's tenth year, taught him in such a manner that, 'Before he was sixteen he had not only studied the leading grammarians, but was

familiar with all the best Greek and Latin authors, whose names the enraptured tutor proudly enumerates in his life of Henry VII.' Arthur was supposed to have learned Greek from André, while Henry is not reported as being acquainted with that language. It is hard to tell whether Arthur really knew much Greek, for Thomas Linacre, the doctor and tutor to Arthur from about 1500 or 1501, left no testimonial to his student's proficiency. He did, however, dedicate to Arthur his Latin translation from the Greek of Proclus *On the Sphere*. He also instructed Arthur and Catherine of Aragon in Italian. Though he later became Henry VIII's physician, it is not possible to tell if he was Henry's tutor too. Giles D'Ewes, the keeper of Henry VII's library, taught both boys their French and even found time to tutor their sister, Mary.

Some historians think that André may have taught Prince Henry as well as Arthur, but this would have been almost impossible in the earlier period, since Arthur kept watch over the Welsh Border with his council at Ludlow Castle, Shropshire, while his younger brother was domiciled in the royal nursery at Eltham. Henry probably had his own teachers and, on his brother's death, fell heir not only to Arthur's title but also to them. One of Henry's tutors was the celebrated poet, Skelton, who later boasted in his poem *Against Garneshce* that 'the honour of England I learned to spell'. Skelton, a graduate in rhetoric at three universities: Oxford, Cambridge, and Louvain, wrote an educational treatise entitled *Speculum Principis* for the instruction of his charge, dedicated to both Henry and Arthur. The work is somewhat medieval in tone with its emphasis on the seven deadly sins and its stern moralizing. Another tutor, William Hone or Hoone, was appointed about 1504 or 1505 as Henry's instructor, but not much is known of him.

The quality of Henry's education is difficult to determine. One must note Erasmus's statement that André was a man of 'mean' abilities. His comment may have little significance, since Erasmus had a tendency to be hypercritical of those less scholarly than himself. In fact, André may have been a good teacher, for Francis Bacon refers to the tradition that Arthur was 'learned beyond his years'. Erasmus himself testified in

1529 to Henry's facility in Spanish, Latin, French, and Italian; and declared that Henry, with little help, wrote the theological tract, *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*. He noted Henry's familiarity with mathematics and music; and concluded with some characteristic hyperbole that Henry was a universal genius. But even a genius must be taught—if Henry had such a grasp of languages, music, mathematics, and theology, he must have had good instruction. Erasmus understood this; otherwise he would not have called Skelton the light and ornament of British learning.

Perhaps the youthful prince was not so precocious as Erasmus or his tutors were to remember, but Henry did have a genuine musical talent. Seeing it, his father fostered his interest by allowing him to have his own minstrel and providing him with a lute. The result was that Henry became an expert musician with a mastery of the lute, organ, and harpsichord. In later life he demonstrated his musical attainments by the composition of hymns, ballads, and two masses. His interest continued, possibly fostered by his affection for dancing and religion, which have deeply felt musical affinities. His joyous embrace of the Christian virtues taught by his tutors can best be seen in the verse in which he declares:

My mind shall be;
Virtue to use
Vice to refuse
Thus shall I use—me.

In addition to the men responsible for Henry's formal education, his contact with his grandmother and his father cannot have been without effect. Some credit Margaret Beaufort with being responsible for the little prince's education. She was an unusual woman, with profound literary and religious instincts. She spoke French, as did most of the aristocracy, and indulged her passion for the language by translating a few French works. On her death 'she left a fine library of books in English, French, and Latin . . .' She was deeply religious; she had translated *The Imitation of Christ*, usually attributed to Thomas à Kempis, and she belonged to five religious houses. Her life was filled with charitable deeds: the establishment of an almshouse near Westminster Abbey, another at Hatfield, and the endowment of St. John's College, Oxford. In determining her benefactions,

and possibly deciding the content of Henry's education, she was advised by her chaplain, John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, a man interested in the new critical thought and a devout Catholic who was later executed for his refusal to submit to the Acts of Succession and Supremacy (1534).

Henry's contact with his devout grandmother and her chaplain may explain his own orthodoxy; the development of his tender conscience, and his taste for theological dispute. He gained an easy familiarity with the scholastic philosophers, St. Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. Nor did his interest in religion ever flag or his enjoyment of its liturgy and ceremony. When he became King, we find the Venetian Ambassador reporting in 1519 that Henry ' . . . was very religious; heard three masses daily when he hunted, and sometimes five on other days, besides hearing office daily in the Queen's chamber, that is to say, vespers and compline'.

After Arthur's death, Henry VII took an increasing interest in Prince Henry's education. The King watched his progress closely. Fortunately, we have a first-hand report made by the Spaniard, the Duke de Estrada, which describes the new relationship between father and son; king and heir.

'The Prince of Wales is with the King. Formerly the King did not like to take the Prince of Wales with him in order not to interrupt his studies. It is quite wonderful how much the King likes the Prince of Wales. He has good reason to do so, for the Prince deserves all love. But it is not only from love that the King takes the Prince with him; he wishes to improve him. Certainly there could be no better school in the world than the society of such a father as Henry VII. He is so wise and attentive to everything; nothing escapes his attention. There is no doubt the Prince has an excellent governor and steward in his father.'

The body as well as the mind of the young Prince was trained. According to all the courtesy books, skill at arms was a necessary accomplishment of a young nobleman. Even Machiavelli's *Prince*, (1513) written too late to be of use in Henry's education, but typical of an earlier attitude, stressed the importance of hunting as a proper physical exercise, since it kept a prince fit and psychologically prepared for war. If Henry was like most boys of his age, he learned field

sports, such as deer-hunting. Youths generally practised sports from about the age of fourteen and learned to joust at sixteen. Henry, being a rather precocious boy, may have started his jousting at an earlier age. He was physically well qualified for chivalric exercises, for De Puebla, the Spanish representative at the English court, described him in 1507 as ' . . . already taller than his father, and his limbs are of a gigantic size'. At sixteen, his frame may have been only slightly less than his proportions at the age of twenty-three: height, six feet two inches; waist, thirty-five inches; and chest, forty-two inches.

Moreover, there was still great interest in chivalry at the court; Henry VII had recommended that Caxton translate and print *The Book of Fayttes of Armes and of Chyvelrye*, a popular chivalric work, until then only available in French. For his translation, Caxton used the King's personal copy of the French work.

Besides his own amusements, his foreign visitors, and his care in the education of his children, Henry VII was a builder. On his accession he re-surfaced Greenwich Palace with red brick and changed its name from Margaret of Anjou's somewhat romantic Placentia Palace to Greenwich. After the royal palace at Sheen burned down in 1498, he rebuilt it and christened it Richmond. He also made improvements at his children's residence, Eltham in Kent. Under his direction, new chambers were added at Westminster Palace. He made such extensive repairs at Baynard's Castle in London in 1501 that Stow said that he 'new built this house'. On the ruins of John of Gaunt's old palace of Savoy, he erected the Hospital of St. John the Baptist for the relief of one hundred poor people. For his son Arthur he built up Tickenhall in Worcestershire.

Unquestionably, however, his reputation as a builder rests on his plans for Westminster Abbey. Henry hoped to build a worthy edifice to house his own remains and those of his half-uncle Henry VI, whom he earnestly entreated the papacy to canonize. But Henry VI never left his resting place at Windsor, nor was he canonized. The work at Westminster, though, went forward; it began in 1502 under the direction of the architect, Robert Vertue, and the Master of Works, William Bolton, the Prior of St. Bartholomew's.

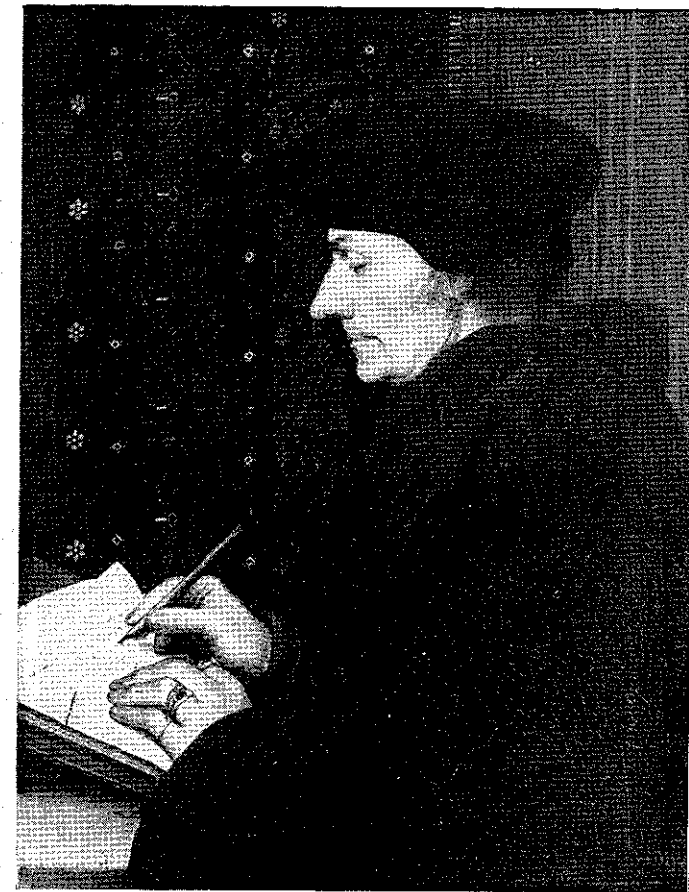


Photo: Giraudon

During Henry VII's reign, ERASMUS taught at Oxford, where he found 'so much polish and learning'; portrait by Holbein

By 1509 the vault was complete. Originally, Henry had an agreement with the Italian sculptor Guido Mazzoni, known as Paganino, to carve his tomb, but Paganino, who worked at the French court, did not carry out the work. Instead, during the reign of Henry VIII, it fell to the genius of Pietro Torrigiano, the Florentine who was Michelangelo's contemporary. The results, of course, speak for themselves.

In reviewing life at Henry's court, one sees a far more lively scene than originally suspected. The King's passion for music, court revels, sport, foreign scholarship, and more lowly amusements, reveals a keen interest in life and in the new intellectual currents which were transforming the Continent.