ARDENT SUITOR OR RELUCTANT GROOM? Henry VII and Elizabeth of York Part 1: Ardent suitor

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On 18 January 1486 Henry VII married Elizabeth of York, symbolically uniting the royal houses of Lancaster and York and laying the foundations of Tudor dynastic success. By the time Henry's court historian, Polydore Vergil, published his English History, the *Anglica Historia*, in 1534, the matrimonial union of these former adversaries had become a national panacea, evidence, no less, of God's benediction:

> **It is legitimate to attribute this [marriage] to divine intervention, for plainly by it all things which nourished the two most ruinous factions were utterly removed, by it the two houses of Lancaster and York were united and from the union the true and established royal line emerged which now reigns.[1]**

Despite Vergil's faith in the providential care of the Almighty, Henry's relationship with Elizabeth of York proved to be complex and unpredictable. If we strip away the certainties of hindsight and track Henry's matrimonial destiny in real time, a remarkable story begins to emerge. Instead of the divinely ordained dynastic alliance described by Vergil, we find a problematic, politically charged reality. This two-part article therefore seeks to re-evaluate Henry's marriage and attempts to understand why a seemingly ardent suitor became a rather reluctant groom. In this first instalment we will examine Henry's troubled 'courtship' of Elizabeth of York, from its inception in the aftermath of Richard III's accession to his eventual triumph at Bosworth in August 1485. In the second instalment (March 2020) we will unravel the political contradictions of Henry's early reign as the new king's marital policy clashed with the expectations of his Yorkist supporters.

Matrimonial conspiracy

Henry's union with Elizabeth of York was a consequence of Richard III's controversial accession in the summer of 1483. In the autumn of that year, following the disappearance of the deposed Edward V and his younger brother, Richard, duke of York, a rebellion in the south of England aimed to overthrow Richard and place the Lancastrian exile Henry Tudor on the throne. Both Sir Thomas More and Polydore Vergil describe a plot in which those who took up arms against Richard did so in the belief that Henry, once king, would make Elizabeth of York his queen. According to Vergil, a 'conspiracy was laid at London betwixt Elizabeth [Woodville] the queen, wife to king Edward, and Margaret [Beaufort] mother to earl Henry'. Once the 'slaughter of king Edward's children was known', Margaret proposed a scheme in which Elizabeth's 'eldest daughter might be given in marriage to her son Henry', so that King Richard 'might

easily be dejected from all honour and bereft of the realm.' The queen at once agreed and promised the support of 'all her husband King Edward's friends', on the condition that Henry 'might be sworn to take in marriage Elizabeth her daughter, after he shall have gotten the realm'.[2] It was upon this basis that Woodville Yorkists committed themselves to Henry's cause.

The anonymous chronicler of Crowland Abbey in Lincolnshire describes what appears to be the next stage in the conspiracy, transmission of the Beaufort/Woodville plot to John Morton, bishop of Ely, held prisoner at Brecon castle by Richard III's principal ally, Henry Stafford, duke of Buckingham. Crowland states that while Richard was in York in September 1483, 'a rumour arose that King Edward's sons, by some unknown manner of violent destruction, had met their fate.' The rebels, whose plans to restore Edward V consequently stood at the point of collapse, turned to 'Henry, earl of Richmond, who had already spent many years in exile in Brittany.' According to Crowland, Morton persuaded Buckingham to betray Richard and write to Henry:

> inviting him to hasten into the Kingdom of England as fast as he could reach the shore and take Elizabeth, the dead king's eldest daughter, to wife and with her, at the same time, possession of the whole kingdom.[3]

Despite the failure of that rebellion and Buckingham's subsequent execution, many of the leading rebels and their supporters evaded capture and joined Henry in Brittany. Far from discouraged, the exiles reaffirmed their support for Henry's cause, and Henry reiterated his pledge to Elizabeth of York. On Christmas Day 1483, Henry, 'upon his oath promised, that, so soon as he should be king, he would marry Elizabeth, King Edward's daughter.' In return, the rebels 'swore unto him homage as though he had been already created king'.[4] At about the same time Henry and Elizabeth, or others acting on their behalf, applied to the Roman Curia for a marriage dispensation. On 27 March 1484, the Papal Penitentiary duly released Henry and Elizabeth 'from the canonical impediment of being related twice in the fourth degrees of consanguinity and legitimised their future issue'.[5] Although Henry's bid for the throne had ended in disaster, it is nevertheless clear that the Beaufort/Woodville alliance remained intact, and that continued opposition to Richard III rested on Henry's marital commitment to Elizabeth of York.

Matrimonial disappointment

However, during 1484 and 1485 Richard consolidated his kingship and took steps to undermine Henry's hopes of a future marriage with Elizabeth of York. First, in 1484, parliament ratified Richard's royal title. Evidence first disclosed in 1483 by Robert Stillington, bishop of Bath and Wells, revealed that Edward IV had secretly married Lady Eleanor Talbot before bigamously wedding Elizabeth Woodville. The pre-contract (Edward's previous contract of marriage with Eleanor Talbot) bastardised and barred from the throne Edward's Woodville children, including Henry's intended queen, Elizabeth of York. Consideration is rarely, if ever, afforded Henry's reaction to Richard's parliament, but the fact that the highest court in the land ratified Richard's title must have been a cause for concern.[6] In his exile in Brittany, Henry's future, though not without hope, was uncertain at best. Elizabeth's bastardisation may have prompted Henry to reconsider the advisability of such a match. The political establishment had rejected Elizabeth and her siblings on the grounds of illegitimacy: would they accept her as a future royal consort?

Second, on 1 March 1484, Richard came to terms with Elizabeth Woodville, who finally permitted her daughters to leave sanctuary.[7] Richard promised to 'marry such of them as now be marriageable to gentlemen born'.[8] This rapprochement threatened not only to deprive Henry of a Yorkist bride, but also signalled Woodville abandonment of the 1483 Beaufort/Woodville marriage alliance. Polydore Vergil accused Elizabeth Woodville of 'forgetting her faith and promise given to Margaret, Henry's mother'.[9] Henry had risked his life in the autumn of 1483 in a failed invasion that would have made Elizabeth of York his queen. Despite the renewal of that marital commitment several weeks later on Christmas Day 1483, Elizabeth Woodville had betrayed Henry and made peace with the man he had attempted to overthrow. Henry must have felt anger, resentment, and exasperation in equal measure.

Third, following the death of Richard's queen, Anne Neville, on 16 March 1485, the widowed king negotiated a double foreign marriage; Elizabeth of York to wed Manuel, duke of Beja, and Richard to take Princess Joanna of Portugal as his new royal consort.[10] However, a rumour arose that Richard himself intended to marry Elizabeth of York, and that he had already married Elizabeth's younger sister, Cecily, to 'an obscure man of no reputation'. The rumour 'pinched Henry by the very stomach, because thereby he saw that he could not now expect the marriage of any of king Edward's daughters, wherefore he thought it was to be feared least his friends should forsake him.'[11] Richard, of course, did not marry Cecily to 'an obscure man of no reputation',[12] and he publicly denied any intention to marry his niece.[13] It was, in fact, Richard's Portuguese marriage plans, and not the spurious rumour, that dealt a serious blow to Henry's ambitions.

Finally, in summer 1485, Elizabeth Woodville persuaded her exiled son, Thomas, marquess of Dorset, to desert Henry's 'court' in Paris, 'and with all speed convenient to return into England, where he should be sure to be called of the king unto high promotion.'[14] Dorset's failure to escape, however, could not disguise the all-too-obvious fact that the Beaufort/Woodville alliance was dead. The once cherished union with

Elizabeth of York, so crucial to Henry's hopes, now lay in tatters. Henry, on the advice of fellow exiles, decided instead to explore the possibility of an alternative Yorkist bride. A sister of Walter Herbert, the second son of Henry's former guardian, William Herbert, earl of Pembroke, offered a potential solution. The Herbert family were staunch supporters of the house of York and, equally important, wielded authority and influence in Wales. Despite initial attempts to open negotiations nothing transpired by the time Henry's invasion fleet left France in early August 1485.[15] Nevertheless, the Herbert initiative was a sure sign that Henry himself had discarded the possibility of a Woodville marriage.

A new strategy

The collapse of the Beaufort/Woodville alliance and the parliamentary ratification of Richard III's title prompted the emergence in November 1484 of a new and breath-takingly audacious strategy. Instead of emphasising the political necessity of marriage with Elizabeth of York, as he had in 1483, Henry, 'according to the Burgundian chronicler Jean Molinet', was 'urged by the earl of Oxford and, from England, by the Lord Stanley to use the title of king'.[16] The pretence that Henry had already ascended the throne conveniently dispensed with Elizabeth of York and instead promoted his royal title as heir of Lancaster.[17] At the same time the French regency government of Charles VIII declared Henry the rightful heir of Henry VI, an announcement that appears to coincide with the arrival at the French court of the staunchly Lancastrian earl of Oxford. The 'sudden French emphasis on Henry's Lancastrian connections might have been due to Oxford's influence'.[18]

Evidence of Henry's bold new strategy survives in three letters written to friends and supporters over a period of several months from November 1484 to the battle of Bosworth in August 1485.[19] None of these letters refer to Elizabeth of York or a royal wedding. In the earliest example, Henry writes in regal style to his 'honourable good friends, and our allies' in 'furtherance of my rightful claim due and lineal inheritance of the crown', requesting assistance 'in my just quarrel', and signing himself HR (Henricus Rex).[20] Another letter, sent to the Welsh gentleman John ap Meredith, begins with the customary royal salutation, 'By the King. Right trusty and well beloved we greet you well'.[21] As Rosemary Horrox observed, 'None of Henry's predecessors who seized the throne by force made such an early and explicit declaration of their sovereignty.'[22] Henry's presumption prompted a rapid response from Richard III. On 7 December 1484 the king issued a proclamation condemning Henry's 'ambitious and insatiable covetousness … encroacheth upon him the name and title of Royal estate of this Realm of England, whereunto he hath no manner interest, right or colour …'.[23]

Henry's new Lancastrian strategy also involved a papal dimension in which one of his principal agents, John Morton, bishop of Ely, secured the blessing of the highest authority in Christendom for Henry's claim to rule in his own right. In late 1484, Morton set out for Rome, where he arrived no later than 31 January 1485 and where he probably stayed until at least the beginning of May. C. S. L. Davies has suggested that Morton may have sought a marriage dispensation for Henry and Elizabeth and that he may have hoped to mobilise ecclesiastical obstacles to any alternative marriage involving Elizabeth of York.[24] However, as previously noted, recent research shows that Henry and Elizabeth had already obtained a papal dispensation in March 1484. By the time Morton travelled to Rome the couple were in fact free to wed. As we shall see in part two of this article, Morton's papal intrigue had nothing to do with dispensations. His real purpose became clear in March 1486, when Innocent VIII issued an extra-ordinary bull confirming Henry's title in the most emphatic terms and threatening to excommunicate any who rebelled against the new king. Morton had in fact secured papal approval for Henry's new strategy as the lineal heir of Lancaster.

Thus, by the time Henry took the field at Bosworth on 22 August 1485, the surviving evidence shows clearly that he projected himself as king in his own right, and that his cause no longer prioritised a marriage with Elizabeth of York. The Beaufort/Woodville alliance, forged in the aftermath of Richard III's accession, disintegrated in 1484 as Richard III reasserted his authority. Abandoned, on one hand, by Elizabeth Woodville and threatened, on the other, by parliament's ratification of Richard's royal title, Henry and his inner circle devised a new and radically ambitious strategy. Presuming the title of king, Henry presented a Lancastrian restoration rather than the Yorkist/Edwardian succession implicit in the Beaufort/Woodville conspiracy. Despite the fact that many believed his claim to derive from the promised union with Elizabeth of York, Henry 'assumed in his own name the title of King, without any relation to the Lady Elizabeth, and persisted in it afterwards.'[25]

The bastardisation of Elizabeth of York and her siblings has not figured as a serious consideration in Henry's journey to royal wedlock. The fact that Henry took Elizabeth as his queen in January 1486 has tended to obscure the matrimonial difficulties posed by the precontract. Henry, clearly, could not have won the throne without the support of those disaffected Woodville/Yorkists who rallied to his banner under the terms of the Beaufort/Woodville alliance. These stalwarts shared his exile and fought at Bosworth in the hope of witnessing the dynastic union originally envisaged in 1483. Yet from November 1484 Henry claimed the crown in his own right, without any discernible indication that their Yorkist aspirations would be met. In the second part of this article, we will

explore the fault lines of Henry's early reign as the long shadow of the precontract exposed the conflicting interests of the new king's Lancastrian agenda and the expectations of his Yorkist supporters.

Notes and references

1. D. Hay (ed.), *The Anglica Historia of Polydore Vergil 1485–1537*, Camden Series vol. lxxiv (1950), p. 7. For a contrary view see R. L. Storey, *The Reign of Henry VII* (1968), p. 61.
2. *Three Books of Polydore Vergil's History*, ed. H. Ellis, Camden Society, vol. xxix (1844), pp 195–6. Virgil's account is largely similar to that provided by Sir Thomas More: *The History of King Richard III* by Thomas More, published by the Ex-classics Project, 2013 www.exclassics.com pp. 47–8.
3. N. Pronay and J. Cox (eds.), *The Crowland Chronicle Continuations 1459–1486* (1986), p. 163.
4. *Polydore Vergil's History*, ed. H. Ellis, p. 203. Vergil states Rennes Cathedral as the venue for Henry's Christmas Day oath, but A. Bouchard, *Les Grandes Croniques de Bretaigne* (Caen, 1518), fo, ccviii r., states Vannes. C. S. L. Davies, 'Bishop John Morton, the Holy See and the Accession of Henry VII', *English Historical Review*, 102 (1987), p. 14 n. 3.
5. P. D. Clarke, 'English Royal Marriages in the Papal Penitentiary in the Fifteenth Century', *English Historical Review*, vol. 120, no. 488 (September 2005), pp 1024–5.
6. 'The phrase 'High Court of Parliament' began to be used in the 1380s and came into wider use in the fifteenth century. It was not a phrase with a precise significance; its most obvious meaning was that parliament made and unmade laws; it was a lawyer's phrase. It had the merit of conveying in traditional rather than political terms a sense of the authority and status which parliament undoubtedly now possessed.' A. L. Brown, *The Governance of Late Medieval England 1272–1461* (1989), p. 233.
7. S. B. Chrimes, *Henry VII* (1972), p. 29.
8. R. Horrox and P. W. Hammond (eds.), *British Library Harleian Manuscript 433* (1982), vol. 3, p. 190.
9. *Polydore Vergil's History*, ed. H. Ellis, p. 210.
10. Barrie Williams, 'The Portuguese Connection and the Significance of "the Holy Princess"', *The Ricardian*, Vol. 6, No. 80, March 1983, pp 138–145. See also Wendy Johnson's contribution to the debate, 'Elizabeth of York's Letter', *Ricardian Bulletin*, Spring 2005, pp 30–1.
11. *Polydore Vergil's History*, ed. H. Ellis, p. 215.
12. In early 1485 Richard married Cecily to Ralph Scrope of Upsall, brother of the king's ally Thomas, Lord Scrope, and a member of the royal household. R. Horrox, *Richard III* (1989), p. 295.
13. *Crowland Chronicle*, pp 175–7.
14. *Polydore Vergil's History*, ed. H. Ellis, p. 210. Ralph Griffiths has suggested that Dorset 'may have been preparing for flight as early as February 1485': R. A. Griffiths and R. S. Thomas, *The Making of the Tudor Dynasty* (2005 edn), pp 140–1.
15. Chrimes, *Henry VII*, p. 38 and n. 1. See also Griffiths and Thomas, *Tudor Dynasty*, pp 142–3.
16. Griffiths and Thomas, *Tudor Dynasty*, pp 138–9.
17. 'Henry was able to present himself as heir of Lancaster because his mother's Beaufort family descended directly from John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, the father of England's first Lancastrian king'. Griffiths and Thomas, *Tudor Dynasty*, p. 209.
18. S. Cunningham, *Henry VII* (2007), pp 26–7.
19. R. Horrox, 'Henry Tudor's Letters to England during Richard III's Reign', *The Ricardian*, vol. VI, No 80 (March 1983), pp 155–8.
20. Chrimes, *Henry VII*, p. 39. Ralph Griffiths has argued that the signature 'HR' is a misreading of 'H', 'a new royal signature which Henry continued to use until well after he gained the throne.' Griffiths and Thomas, *Tudor Dynasty*, p. 139.
21. The two remaining letters are published in J. Wynn, *History of the Gwydir Family* (1878), p. 48, and G. Grazebrook, *Miscellanea Genealogica et Heraldica*, series 4, vol. 5 (1912–13), facsimile facing p. 30.
22. Horrox, 'Henry Tudor's Letters', p. 156.
23. Griffiths and Thomas, *Tudor Dynasty*, p. 139.
24. Davies, 'Bishop John Morton', pp 13–14.
25. F. Bacon, *The History of Henry VII of England* (1616), p. 8.