

How far was the style of kingship of Henry VI responsible for his downfall?

Henry VI was King of England; from 1422 to 1461, and 1470-1471 after his readepetion and also King of France from 1422-1453. Henry's reign was blighted by major conflict both at home and abroad, through The Hundred Years War, and the War of the Roses Henry would '[lose] two Kingdoms, one of them twice'.¹ Henry VI's downfall is witnessed through a mixture of; his personal style of Kingship which allowed the rise court factionalism, which was fought out between powerful councillors, advisors and overmighty subjects, his own personality and mental health, and through his inheritance.² Henry VI's downfall took place within a sequence of events starting with the ending of his minority in 1437, through the War of the Roses, until his eventual usurpation by Edward IV at the Battle of Towton in 1461. Whilst Henry was restored to the throne in 1470, he was merely a puppet of the Earl of Warwick. The Earl removed Edward IV from power in order to return to his previous apex of authority before Edward marginalised him, this second period on the throne for Henry does not represent a return to power for Henry as Warwick exercised the control and power of the Royal office.

Henry's personal style of Kingship lent itself to the domination of politics and court by a few key favourites. Some of these key advisors who dominated were, William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk, and Edmund Beaufort, Duke of Somerset. Both men were part of and led the powerful Beaufort family that dominated court and politics from the 1430s to the 1450s after the downfall of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, in 1441.³ Suffolk had risen from the aristocratic rank of Earl to Duke throughout the 1430s and 1440s through his close connections to the King as the Head of the Royal Household.⁴ Not only was Suffolk popular with the King, he also enjoyed considerable support from Margaret of Anjou owing to his filling in for Henry during their marriage via proxy.⁵ This support from both King and Queen consolidated Suffolk's position allowing his actions to enjoy royal backing. Suffolk not only enjoyed a healthy level of royal support, but also a large amount of support from the nobility; many of the nobles accepted the arrangements, as they were aware of Henry's shortcomings, and had full confidence in Suffolk's ability to control the King, therefore he was able to dominate and lead government successfully with little resistance.⁶ However, to get into this position of power, Suffolk had to remove Humphry, Duke of Gloucester from the centre of power. Gloucester had been a major figure in Government alongside John, Duke of Bedford, and Cardinal Beaufort during Henry's minority, and held a large amount of

¹ L. Johnson, *How Henry VI's love of peace cost him the throne – and his life*, (available at: <https://www.historyextra.com/period/plantagenet/henry-vi-nice-guy-terrible-king/>, 2019)

² J.W. McKenna, *Henry VI of England and the Dual Monarchy: Aspects of Royal Political Propaganda, 1422-1432*, found in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 1965, Vol. 28, (The Warburg Institute, London, 1965) pg 145

³ J. Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of the Kingship*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996) pg 189
C. Carpenter, *The War of the Roses: Politics and the Constitution in England, c. 1437-1509*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002) pg 97

⁴ J. Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of the Kingship*, pg 195-196

⁵ D. Jones, *The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses and the Rise of the Tudor*, (Faber & Faber, London, 2014) pg 85

⁶ *Ibid* pg 216

political influence owing to his position as heir to the throne and the King's Uncle. After the death of Bedford Gloucester had led Government before Henry came of age. The removal of such a powerful, and influential figure had to be planned carefully in order to minimise the impact. This removal was done by; marginalising the Duke's influence in the council through a partnership with his rival Cardinal Beaufort, forcing the Duke to withdraw from public life; through the trail of and eventual forced divorce from his wife Eleanor of Cobham in 1441. The carefully planned marginalisation of Gloucester eventually led to his arrest on charges of treason at Parliament in Bury St. Edmunds in 1447.⁷ This arrest left Suffolk's power virtually unopposed, and unchecked. Whilst Suffolk was able to enjoy the support of the Nobility, the same couldn't not be said of the people and Suffolk's control of Government and the King came to an end in 1450. The people, seen through Cade's Revolt', had clearly had enough of Suffolk's 'accroachment' of power and they began to see that with Suffolk dominating government the King was no longer in control of 'Royal Will'.⁸ The fall of Suffolk was seen to with his imposed exile by the King, and murder by Pirates on his way to Europe, however, the fall of Suffolk says more about Henry's failing than it does Suffolk's. The fall of Suffolk was a 'dramatic demonstration' of Henry's 'inadequate' style of Kingship as it clearly demonstrates that Henry was incapable of leading a Government himself, incapable of using a council fairly, and too highly dependent on close advisors.⁹ The fall of Suffolk also highlighted Henry's failings as a King, it was shown that for in order for England to be governable in anyway arrangements had to be made around, through and by manipulating the King.¹⁰

Upon the death of Suffolk in 1450, Henry, despite the public's dislike of Suffolk's style of Government, came to rely upon another favourite, Edmund Beaufort, Duke of Somerset. Somerset inherited the remains of Suffolk's Government and the support of the majority of the nobility, whereas Richard, Duke of York, owing to Jack Cade's adoption of York's family name Mortimer, came to hold the support of the people.¹¹ Henry's inability to rule on his own accord, and his inclination to rely upon his favourites often lent itself to factionalism, as seen with Suffolk, and Gloucester, and the turning to Somerset created even stronger, more distinct factions than there had been previously. It was accepted by the nobility that Somerset was the real authority behind the crown, and that he was controlling things from behind the scenes.¹² Whilst Somerset did work to reinforce the King's personal rule, which strengthen Henry's position at the time, it is a damning indictment of Henry's style of Kingship that he had two key advisors having to take the reins of Government due to his lack of ability.¹³ Much as with Suffolk, Somerset also relied upon a healthy level of support from the Queen, and at the apogee of Somerset's powers he was one of the Queen's most trusted advisors.¹⁴ This royal favour is clearly demonstrated through the Christening of

⁷ D. Jones, *The Hollow Crown*, pg 95-96

M. Lewis, *Richard Duke of York: King by Right*, (Amberley, Stroud, 2016) pg 85

⁸ J. Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of the Kingship*, pg 198, 261-262

⁹ Ibid pg 262

¹⁰ Ibid pg 252-253

¹¹ Ibid pg 261

¹² D. Jones, *The Hollow Crown*, pg 288-290, 293

¹³ Ibid pg 288-290

¹⁴ H.E Mauer, *Margaret of Anjou: Queenship and Power in late Medieval England*, (The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2003) pg

Prince Edward, where Somerset and Buckingham would become his Godparents.¹⁵ The removal of Suffolk and Somerset, in 1450, and 1455 respectively, also demonstrates Henry's poor choice in advisors, as both were incredibly unpopular, and unable to command the kind of respect, and obedience that Henry would have had if he was capable of stepping up. Henry's reliance upon Somerset also demonstrates an unwillingness, or inability to adapt and change his style of Kingship, and the lack of change in style is why his style of Kingship plays a part in his downfall.

Somerset, in the same vein as Suffolk with Gloucester, sought to marginalise the main threat to his rule, the heir presumptive and most powerful magnate in England, Richard, Duke of York.¹⁶ Edward III's son went on to have large, powerful families which became the root of 'overmighty' subjects, and for Henry VI, no subject was mightier than Richard, Duke of York. York's claim to the throne, and fortune came from Lionel of Antwerp's House of Mortimer, and Edmund of Langley's House of York, making his claim to the throne stronger than the Crown's.¹⁷ York's inheritance made him one of the Country's largest landowners, and with much of it being rented out farmland he was able to command a considerable income of over £600.¹⁸ York's status as a Duke, and relationship through marriage to one of the largest most powerful families in England, the Nevilles, afforded him a large amount of political capital, and influence.¹⁹ Despite a position on the King's council being a birth right for York due to his; position, lineage, and wealth, Somerset rightly saw him as a threat and sought to exclude him from the council. The marginalisation of Henry wasn't just a Somerset led policy; York's absence from the council until 1437 was a policy directed by Henry, and the removal of York after his first protectorate, and subsequent reversal of York's Protectorate policies demonstrates that Henry deliberately side-lined him.²⁰ His 'style' of Kingship, and choice of marginalising York was an action that would directly lead to his downfall, as it began the War of the Roses. Furthermore, the poor treatment towards York clearly reflects the actions of Richard II against his heir presumptive, Henry Bolingbroke, actions led to his usurpation, much as they would for Henry. The marginalisation of York, and poor government led York to believe that he was more capable of succeeding where Henry could not, and with the help of Parliament passed the Act of Accord, which formally, and legally brought about the downfall of Henry, as it declared York and his family the heirs to the throne, disinheriting Prince Edward, whilst also declaring York, Prince of Wales, Earl of Chester, Duke of Cornwall and Lord Protector of England.²¹

It is also important to understand the role that Margaret of Anjou played within her Husband's regime. Margaret of Anjou was considered an important advisor to Henry and was a key figure within the Lancastrian cause as she fought for her Husband's and Son's right to the

¹⁵ Ibid pg 90-91

¹⁶ D.Jones, *The Hollow Crown*, pg 291-292, 295

¹⁷ P.A. Johnson, *Duke Richard of York: 1411-1460*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991) pg 1

M. Lewis, *Richard Duke of York: King By Right*, (Amberley, Stroud, 2016) Genealogical table 1

¹⁸ Ibid pg 14, 73

¹⁹ Ibid pg 2

²⁰ H.E Mauer, *Margaret of Anjou*, pg 117-119

²¹ J.S Davies, *Anno xxxix. A.D. 1460-1*. Found in *An English chronicle of the reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI written before the year 1471; with an appendix, containing the 18th and 19th years of Richard II and the Parliament at Bury St. Edmund's, 25th Henry VI and supplementary additions from the Cotton. ms. chronicle called "Eulogium*, (Camden Society, London, 1856) , pg 103-106

throne. Margaret, however, sowed division between the nobility, and her choice of favourite advisors mirrored Henry's. Margaret enjoyed a close relationship with Suffolk, Somerset and Buckingham, clearly indicating to the nobility where the Crown's support lay. Somerset's powers peaked in 1453, and at around this time he had also become a close advisor of the Queen, this closeness was evident at the Christening of Prince Edward, where the Crown's principal advisors, Somerset and Buckingham were named the Godparents of the Prince.²² The rise of Somerset as one of Margaret's closest advisors, and the shunning of the tradition of naming the highest ranking noble as a Godfather to the heir to the throne clearly demonstrating that Margaret had sided against York, despite the two being on good terms, and with her maybe being sympathetic to his position, before 1453.²³ These are political actions, and unprecedented actions of Queenship; this was clearly able to occur as Margaret was] following her Husband's partisan lead in choosing his favourite advisors as her own, and because he was unable to control the factionalism that existed in his court.

Whilst Henry's style of Kingship was facet of Kingship that led to his downfall, his personality explains some of his style, but also led to his downfall too . Henry's personal chaplain, John Blacman, described Henry as a 'devout and pious man', that he was more concerned with spiritual matters than his temporal responsibility, and preferred prayer and reading over 'sports'.²⁴ This was demonstrated by Henry's prioritising of his religious centred educational projects, such as Eton and King's College Cambridge, over the defence of his continental lands.²⁵ His piety even extended itself to domestic policies, demonstrated by the banning of naked bathing in the Roman baths at Bath.²⁶ Whilst Henry was 'normally mentally' developed, his lack of political education meant that he lacked 'political astuteness', and developed a 'youthful dependence on others', hence the rise of powerful and influential advisors.²⁷ These advisors were able to rely on Henry politically and financially, as he supported them by being generous with his patronage, this patronage allowed them to rise within the aristocracy and gain more influence over the rest of the nobility.²⁸ Henry preference of reading and prayer over 'sports', can be demonstrated over Henry's lack of political experience.²⁹ Henry was the first English King to never face an external foe in battle, instead relying upon his advisors to fight for him instead, and he only took to the field in armour once during the War of the Roses, at Ludford Bridge, and during the First Battle of St. Albans he would hide to avoid fighting.³⁰ This lack of military prowess, and distaste of conflict led to a preference for peace, domestically and abroad. Henry's preference for peace abroad was demonstrated by his marriage to Margaret of Anjou,

²² H.E Mauer, *Margaret of Anjou* pg 90-91, 93

²³ Ibid pg 83

²⁴ J. Blacman, *Henry the Sixth*, (Available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/29689/29689-h/29689-h.htm>) pg 25- 28

²⁵ E. F. Jacobs, *The Fifteenth Century: 1399-1485*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1976) Pg 668-671

R. A Griffiths, *The Reign of Henry VI: The Exercise of Royal Authority 1422-1461*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1981)

²⁶R. A Griffiths, *The Reign of Henry VI*, pg 249-251

²⁷ R. A Griffiths, *The Reign of Henry VI*, pg 241, 254

²⁸ Ibid pg 251

²⁹ . Blacman, *Henry the Sixth*, pg 25-28

³⁰ R. A Griffiths, *The Reign of Henry VI*, pg 251

C. Carpenter, *The War of the Roses*, pg 145

H.E Mauer, *Margaret of Anjou*, pg 119

which was an attempt to end the Hundred Years War, and restore diplomatic relations between the two nations.³¹ This preference was demonstrated domestically, through Henry's use of 'Love Days', these 'Love Days' were public displays of reconciliation to demonstrate that a feud had ended, with the most significant of these being the Love Day of 1458, which was supposed to be the ending of hostilities between the two factions at court, the Yorkists and the Lancastrians.³² The Love Day of 1458 demonstrates the failure of which Henry VI was, and how it drove him further towards his downfall, the event increased tensions between the two factions, and made it increasingly clear to the people, and the rest of the nobility that there were two groups vying to control the King.³³ Furthermore, the image that Henry projected played a part in his downfall. With England having been in a constant state of war for over a hundred years Henry image of a Prince without any military might was a juxtaposition to the image of his rivals York, and the future Edward IV. Edward exuded the medieval ideal of what a king should look like and dwarfed the 5'9 Henry at 6'3.³⁴ Edward invoked thoughts of successful, popular, martially able Kings and Princes, such as Edward I, Edmund the Black Prince, and Richard I, imagery which Henry did not conjure.³⁵

One cannot characterise or blame Henry's mental health or his incapacity in 1453 as part of his style of Kingship or for his downfall. Whilst both might have played a part in exacerbating issues that were already present, and marginalising Henry's role in Government post-1453, they are not the reason for his downfall. Henry's mental health issues were part nature, and nurture. Henry had spent the vast majority of his childhood mediating disputes between his uncles, Bedford and Gloucester, which coalesced as an aversion to conflict in adulthood.³⁶ Upon reaching his majority this aversion to conflict is demonstrated by the exclusion of quarrelsome nobles from the Royal councils who disagreed with the King and his key advisors, with York and Gloucester falling victim to this. Henry is also thought to have suffered from Schizophrenia, a view based around Henry's, visual and auditory hallucinations, mutism, depression, immobility and catatonia.³⁷ Many of these symptoms were interpreted by Henry and his hagiographer as religious communication and were precluded by the typical Schizophrenic developmental symptom: personality change.³⁸ Henry personality change came about in the 1440s when he was in his 20s, and it led to being him more prone to; "paranoia, grandiosity, vindictiveness...indecisiveness [and] ambivalence" as these changes became more pronounced there, came an increasing need for others to take charge and lead from the background as Henry was becoming unable to.³⁹ However, it can be said that it is unfair to blame Henry's style of Kingship for his own downfall as he had not had enough time to fully

³¹ H.E Mauer, *Margaret of Anjou*, pg 17-18

³² R.A Griffiths, *King and Country: England and Wales in the Fifteenth Century* (The Hambledon Press, London, 1991) Pg 157

C. Carpenter, *The War of the Roses*, pg 143

³³ C. Carpenter, *The War of the Roses*, pg 143

³⁴ J.C Russel, *Tall Kings: The Height of Medieval English Kings*, found in *The Mississippi Quarterly Vol.10(1)* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1957) pg 30-31

³⁵ Ibid pg 35

³⁶ L. Johnson, *How Henry VI's love of peace cost him the throne – and his life*

³⁷ N. Bark, *Did schizophrenia change the course of English history? The mental illness of Henry VI*. found in: *Medical Hypotheses Vol. 59(4)* (Elsevier, Amsterdam, 2002) pg 419-420

³⁸ Ibid pg 419

³⁹ Ibid pg 420

form his own style of Kingship. Between the ending of Henry's minority in 1437 at 16, and the beginning of his mental decline in his 20s in the 1440s, there was only really a 5-10-year gap in which Henry could develop his style of Kingship. This was not a long enough period of time to firmly develop any proper, truly substantial style of Kingship, therefore his style of Kingship cannot be responsible for his downfall as it had not been afforded the time or conditions to properly develop. One may also argue that his downfall was inevitable due to the European Cultural memory of absent/ incapacitated King, demonstrated in France during the madness of Charles VI where noble infighting both in the nation and the council was rife without the authority of the King.

Henry's inheritance from his father was also responsible for his downfall. Henry's inheritance has been defined as a 'Damnosa hereditas', due to the lofty expectations set by Henry V, and the revival of France's military power.⁴⁰ The loss of France, and Dual Monarchy system was seen as inevitable without the presence of Henry V.⁴¹ Whilst the Treaty of Troyes in 1420 put England in the ascendancy, the untimely death of both Henry V, and Charles VI within a period of a few short months, reinvigorated the French War effort, and created political turmoil as a regency council was left with having to control and govern both England and the newly conquered France. The newly reinvigorated French War effort was headed by Charles VI's Dauphin, Charles VII, leading to a disputed succession in France, which was not aided by Henry visiting France only once in the 24 years between his ascendancy to the French Crown and the loss of France in 1453.⁴² Whilst Henry's downfall in France was a situation that was not helped by his pursuit of a peace policy, which contained the surrendering of Maine in 1444, it largely came about due to the untimely loss of Henry V and his military command, and Henry VI's succession to the dual monarchy as a minor.

The mystique of the English Crown had already faded upon Henry VI's succession, the forced abdication of Edward II in 1327, and the usurpation of Richard II in 1399 still lived fresh in the consciousness of the discontented, and the monarchy. There had been a precedent set regarding what to do with an unpopular ineffectual King, and this had seriously diminished the Crown's reputation as anyone who thought that the King was ineffectual need only look to the past to find a solution. Historically a minority government had not been good news for England. Henry, upon the ending of his minority, and his government had to face, and avoid the precedents set before them, such as; Henry III facing baronial civil war during his minority, and the usurpation of Richard II, who succeeded to the throne as a minor. These were all models which the minority council, led by Bedford, sought to avoid, however, upon the death of Bedford, the council descended into factionalism. Whilst Henry might have gained two kingdoms at less than a year old, he also lost out on the important Royal Apprenticeship. The Royal apprenticeship was seen as an integral part of a European royal prince's upbringing; their fathers, or other anointed rulers taught and showed them how to govern the country, slowly giving them power to make decisions as they grew up and being a role model in how to be a monarch. Some of the most successful monarchs, had had informative royal apprenticeships, such Edward I under Henry III and Henry II under Count Geoffrey V of Anjou and Empress Matilda, whereas Henry VI had no such education, the

⁴⁰ J.W. McKenna, *Henry VI of England and the Dual Monarchy*, pg 145

⁴¹ Ibid pg 145

⁴² L. Johnson, *How Henry VI's love of peace cost him the throne – and his life*

death of father when he was 9 months old, and his grandfather, a few months afterwards, left no Royal figure who could demonstrate to Henry what to do, and how to do it properly. Henry had to learn on the job, hence explaining that Henry was unable to deal with temporal issues, because he had never had anyone demonstrate how to deal with them, thus also explaining the reliance on advisors who demonstrated that they could what Henry was unable to do.⁴³

To conclude, Henry VI's style of Kingship did play a part in his downfall, however it wasn't the only thing that was responsible for it. Whilst Henry's style of Kingship did allow the rise of factionalism, powerful advisors, and overmighty subjects, his personality, his mental health, his upbringing, and his 'damnosa hereditas' all played an equally as significant role in his downfall. Whilst Henry's personality, mental health, upbringing, and inheritance couldn't have changed, his actions and style of Kingship could have. Henry, mainly within Government could have prevented his downfall. The rise of York as a threat to the throne only emerged after his continued absence from the King's Council, had this been rectified earlier and his status and position acknowledged the War of the Roses might have been avoided. Much of Henry's style of Kingship had had the effect of marginalising and angering York who was eventual cause of Henry's downfall. Henry's inheritance also played a large and significant role in his downfall, his grandfather had set a clear precedent with what to with an ineffectual King, which the dissatisfied nobles were merely following and whilst Henry held no power in 1471, the actions of his grandfather still haunted him, with Edward IV replicating his actions when he returned to England in 1471 to reclaim the throne. This inheritance was a difficult thing to manage, yet alone for a man who suffered from severe mental health issues who knew else but being King, and political instability having grown up within it, furthermore many capable advisors; Bedford, Gloucester, Beaufort, Suffolk, and Somerset, all attempted and failed to manage the situation inherited by Henry. The downfall of Henry VI was a combination of everything, but primality it was his inheritance, and style of Kingship that saw him fall from power.

⁴³ L. Johnson, *How Henry VI's love of peace cost him the throne – and his life*

Bibliography

- Bark, N., 2002. Did schizophrenia change the course of English history? The mental illness of Henry VI. *Medical Hypotheses*, 59(4), p. 416–421.
- Blacman, J., 2009. *Henry the Sixth*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/29689/29689-h/29689-h.htm> [Accessed 22 November 2020].
- Carpenter, C., 2002. , *The War of the Roses: Politics and the Constitution in England ,c. 1437-1509*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davies, J. S. ed., London. Anno xxxix. A.D. 1460-1.. In: *An English chronicle of the reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI written before the year 1471; with an appendix, containing the 18th and 19th years of Richard II and the Parliament at Bury St. Edmund's, 25th Henry VI and supplementary add*. London: Camden Society, pp. 99-111.
- Griffiths, R. A., 1981. *The Reign of Henry VI: The Exercise of Royal Authority 1422-1461*. 1st Edition ed. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Griffiths, R. A., 1991. *King and Country: England and Wales in the Fifteenth Century*. 1st Edition ed. London: The Hambledon Press.
- Hicks, M., 2002. *Warwick the Kingmaker*. 2nd Edition ed. London: Blackwell Publishing.
- Jacob, E. F., 1976. *The Fifteenth Century: 1399-1485*. 3rd Edition ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Johnson, L., 2019. *How Henry VI's love of peace cost him the throne – and his life*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.historyextra.com/period/plantagenet/henry-vi-nice-guy-terrible-king/> [Accessed 15 November 2020].
- Johnson, P. A., 1991. *Duke Richard of York: 1411-1460*. 2nd Edition ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Jones, D., 2014. *The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses and the Rise of the Tudor*. 2nd Edition ed. London: Faber and Faber.
- Lewis, M., 2016. *Richard Duke of York: King By Right*. 2nd Edition ed. Stroud: Amberley.
- Mauer, H. E., 2003. *Margaret of Anjou: Queenship and Power in late medieval England*. 2nd Edition ed. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press.
- McFarlane, K., 1981. *England in the Fifteenth Century*. 1st Edition ed. The Hambledon Press: London.
- McKenna, J., 1965. Henry VI of England and the Dual Monarchy: Aspects of Royal Political Propaganda, 1422-1432. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* , 28(1965), pp. 145-162.
- Russel, J. C., 1957. Tall Kings: The Height of Medieval English Kings. *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 10(1), pp. 29-41.
- Seward, D., 2007. *The Wars of the Roses: The Bloody Rivalry for the Throne of England*. 2nd Edition ed. London: Robinson.
- Watts, J., 1996. *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship*. 1st Paperback ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weir, A., 2009. *Lancaster and York: The War of the Roses*. 3rd Edition ed. London: Vintage.