

theology to Henry, I am less concerned with the contextual aspects of the Great Matter, which have been thoroughly explored by other scholars. My own work has been largely on the King's marriages, and on military developments, particularly the navy, and that will be obvious from the pages which follow. I have also been specifically guided by the work of others, most notably of Helen Miller, Mervyn James and, more recently, Eric Ives and George Bernard. In writing this book, it has struck me forcibly what an extraordinary person the King was, and how difficult it is to get inside the minds of renaissance men. Personal monarchy is, and has been for many years, alien to our political mindset. Preoccupied with democracy, we tend to forget how important it was for Henry VIII to build on the support of the gentry. Interest in his opponents has also detracted from our appreciation of just how much support he had, particularly towards the end of his reign. Henry thought of himself as enjoying a direct relationship with God, but he was also aware that God sometimes spoke through the people. I hope that I have succeeded in doing justice to this complex and compelling man.

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Burford, August 2010

'HENRY VIII'
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pp 9-28.

INTRODUCTION: THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF A KING

Our King does not desire gold or silver, but virtue, glory, immortality ... (Lord Mountjoy, 1509)

Ricco, feroce et cupido di Gloria ... (Nicolo Machiavelli, 1513)

Both these very different observers noticed one outstanding characteristic of Henry VIII – his desire for glory, or reputation. It was as true in 1547 as it had been at the beginning of his reign, and was to enjoy a long and vigorous afterlife. Thanks largely to his own actions, he has remained one of the most fascinating of English kings, and speculation about his motives and his effectiveness is as vigorous today as it has ever been. Henry was passionately concerned about his own image, and thanks to his employment of Hans Holbein as his court painter, his magnificence and (largely spurious) self-assurance has communicated itself down the centuries.¹ He has been a hero and a villain; a lecherous tyrant and a constitutional monarch; 'bluff King Hal' and a serial wife-killer. The one thing that no serious student of the sixteenth century can do to Henry VIII is to ignore him.

The construction of his image began, not only in his own lifetime, but before he had even come to the throne. It was visual and ceremonial, and designed to support the dynasty through the creation of honours. In

this Henry was preceded and at first overshadowed by his elder brother, Arthur, who in November 1489, when he was two years old, was borne in splendid state from Shene to London for his induction as Prince of Wales.² At the same time the infant prince was also created Earl of Chester and installed as a Knight of the Garter. Girls were less useful from this point of view, and the christening of Princess Margaret which occurred at the same time was a relatively low-key event. When Henry made his debut on 28 June 1491, he was, first and foremost, a symbol of that fertility which seemed to bless Henry VII and his Queen with the unmistakable marks of Divine favour.³ Unlike Arthur, who had been Duke of Cornwall from birth, Henry did not automatically acquire any title, but offices were swiftly conferred upon him, long before he can have had any notion of their meaning, let alone discharged the duties in person. He became Warden of the Cinque Ports, Constable of Dover Castle and Earl Marshall before he was even out of his cradle, while in September 1494, at the age of three, he became Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. Just over a month later he was created Duke of York. This magnificent ceremony not only demonstrated the much publicised union of the Houses of York and Lancaster, it also stated in the clearest possible fashion that the previous Duke (Edward IV's second son) was dead, and that Perkin Warbeck, then claiming his persona, was a fraud.⁴ In May 1495 Henry was also invested with the Order of the Garter. At the age of ten he played a prominent role in the marriage celebrations of his brother, but that was essentially in support of Arthur's image rather than his own. His next elevation was by necessity rather than choice, because Arthur died in April 1502, and on 18 February 1504 his brother succeeded him as Prince of Wales and Earl of Chester. The splendour of that occasion was somewhat marred by the circumstances which had deprived the aging king not only of his expected heir, but also of his queen. It represented an essential gesture of dynastic continuity.⁵

Apart from these rather notional positions, the adolescent Henry was kept carefully under wraps by his father. It was known in a general way that he was well educated, promised to be a fine specimen of a man, and had a boyish enthusiasm for war games, but as his father's

health declined, the expectations which began to build were based on flimsy evidence of his character and capabilities. As soon as Henry VII was dead, they burst into flower, and Henry was shrewd enough to do everything in his power to encourage the magnificent image with which he had been presented.

At first his self-promotion was occasional, and limited in its appeal. Splendid ceremonies were held at court to mark the Church's seasons, the King's wedding and the birth of his heir.⁶ Henry jousting, went Maying, and enjoyed innumerable banquets and masks. Some of these were put on for the benefit of foreign ambassadors, but always the King was the pivotal figure, his skill at the tilt and his magnificent costumes providing the raw material for innumerable gossip letters. However, outside the range of the court, and perhaps the City of London, these displays were little known about or understood. What was understood was his appetite for war, and the recruitment of the army which he led to France with great fanfares in 1513 led to a wider understanding of his personality than a dozen court festivities. This was an opportunity not to be missed, and his magnificent entry into Tournai wrung the last ounce of advantage out of that not-very-splendid victory.⁷ It was not his fault that his efforts, including the sending of the keys of the town as a trophy to his lady, were upstaged by his servant the Earl of Surrey, the victor of Flodden, who sent her James IV's bloodstained hauberk. Insofar as Henry features in the literature of the period, his appearances are allegorical or disguised. He appears in the title role of John Skelton's *Magnyfycence*, a piece now associated with the expulsion of the minions in 1519, in which role he is represented as a 'noble prince of might' who becomes ensnared by various Vices who succeed in joining his household. He casts off the restraint of wise and prudent councillors in favour of their riotous and irresponsible ways, until recalled to a sense of his duty by four Virtues, 'sad and sober' men to whom he is persuaded to listen.⁸ This is an exaggerated but recognisable version of the events which led to the expulsion of Sir Nicholas Carew and Sir Francis Bryan, two 'Frenchified' jousting companions from the Privy Chamber. Several years later Edward Hall wrote that in May 1519:

... the kynges counsaill secretly communed together of the kynges gentlenes & liberalitee to all persones: by which they perceived that certain young men in his privie chamber, not regarding his estate nor degree, were so familer and homely with hym ... that thei forgat themselves ...⁹

As a result, Henry entrusted the management of the situation to his councillors, and they imported four 'ancient knights' into the Privy Chamber to replace the minions, and the problem was solved. Whether the King was really as compliant as this story suggests hardly matters – 'magnificence' had justified his name and proved his worthiness, and that was the point of Skelton's play.

John Skelton is best known for his satires attacking Wolsey, but even they were backhanded ways of paying compliments to the King, who is consistently represented as 'our moost royall Harry', the true type and ideal of a royal ruler.¹⁰ Until the late 1520s this kind of courtly flattery was the most, and the least, that Henry could expect. He quarrelled with his wife, took mistresses and begat a bastard, waged unsuccessful war and tried to extract money from his subjects by underhand means, but none of this was allowed to affect his chivalric image, which by 1527 had become seriously detached from reality. However, what challenged his self-conceit fundamentally was his 'Great Matter' – his desire to rid himself of Catherine of Aragon.¹¹ Once he was locked into that struggle he could no longer expect a consensus of flattery to follow his every move, and the historiography of his reign can truly be said to begin. After a disappointing reaction to his public declaration of his scruple of conscience, Henry could no longer deceive himself into believing that whatever he did would be supported uncritically by his subjects. Although his own propaganda team took the initiative and issued tracts like *The Glasse of the Truth* in support of his position, they also justified it in the carefully worded preambles to the relevant statutes, and the King was well aware that he had a battle on his hands.¹² Opposition works, usually printed abroad and written by responsible men like John Fisher, concentrated upon attacking his policies rather than his person, but popular opponents were often less scrupulous.

Elizabeth Barton predicted that he would lose his throne if he married Anne Boleyn, and others thought and gossiped to the same effect. Wild prophecies began to circulate, and the sinister word 'moldwarp' began to be uttered.¹³ Henry overcame these seditious mutterings by well-directed coercion, and remained in control of his kingdom, but in Europe he acquired the reputation of a dangerous maverick. The King would probably not much have minded being accused of playing God by Martin Luther, if he had known about it, because he set no store by the reformer's opinions, theological or otherwise, but he was seriously riled by Reginald Pole's *Pro ecclesiasticae unitatis defensione*. This was ostensibly for his eyes only and constituted a thoughtful and intelligent attack, not only upon his policies since 1529, but also upon his personal integrity. It was published, probably without the author's knowledge, in Rome in 1536.¹⁴

Pro ... defensione was the first round in the creation of that 'black legend' of Henry VIII which thereafter dominated all those records of English events which emanated either from Catholic Europe or from the English Catholic community. One of the most vitriolic was Nicholas Sander's *De origine ac progressu schismaticis Anglicani*, published at Cologne in 1585, which attributed Henry's actions in the 1530s entirely to unbridled lust, both for Anne Boleyn and also for the wealth of the Church. This was a line also taken by Robert Parsons in his *Treatise of three conversions...* which was issued at St Omer in 1603.¹⁵ Modern historians in the Catholic tradition have been far more judicious, not only because polemic no longer serves a useful purpose, but because the debate has broadened to embrace the King's whole style of government. Cardinal Gasquet in 1888, while not abandoning the lust and greed interpretation, was more concerned to set the events in context and to admit that there might have been some justification for the King's extreme reactions. In the twentieth century Philip Hughes, while pointing out that Henry had a tendency to alter the law to suit his own convenience, also proposed that there was much amiss with the late medieval Church, and particularly the monasteries, which invited the King's intervention.¹⁶ This concession has been repudiated by more recent scholars, notably Jack Scarisbrick and Eamon Duffy, who have

argued that the Church was in rude health and that Henry's success was primarily the result of his exercise of crude force. It was by executing dissenters on both sides of the confessional divide that the King enforced his will, using fear and intimidation as his principal weapons. Meanwhile, for historians of a Protestant persuasion the reformation was a change waiting to happen. Without denying the importance of the King's actions, they proposed a model of a Church corrupted from within by superstition and idolatry, a tottering edifice awaiting a decisive push. Unfortunately Henry's push had been anything but decisive, as they admitted.¹⁷

John Foxe, standing at the head of this tradition, was frankly puzzled by Henry, who seemed to blow both hot and cold on the reformers – often at the same time. When he repudiated the papal authority, reformed the calendar or introduced the English Bible, he was a Godly Prince, showing a proper regard for the spiritual welfare of his subjects. But when he passed the Act of Six Articles, imposing the mass, or burned John Lambert for heresy, he was a superstitious tyrant. Foxe solved this problem as best he could by claiming that Henry was gullible and easily led. It depended on whether he was listening to Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell or to Stephen Gardiner and the Duke of Norfolk:

Thus while council was about him, and could be heard he did much good, so again when sinister and wicked councillors under subtle and crafty pretences had gotten ever the foot in, thrusting truth and verity out of the prince's ears, how much religion and all good things went prosperously forward before, so much on the contrary side all revoked backwards again ...¹⁸

Henry's personality, no less than his council and his court, were thus caught up in the cosmic struggle of good and evil – the true Church against the false – which is the main theme of the *Acts and Monuments*. By the time that Gilbert Burnet and John Strype were writing in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Foxe's eschatology was no longer in fashion, and Henry had become a sort of latter-day Joshua, a leader chosen by God who was nevertheless doomed not to see the

promised land. His own image of himself as Solomon helped in this respect, because Solomon was not permitted to build the Temple, a task which was reserved for his successor David, an obvious allusion to the completion of the reformation under Edward.¹⁹ Henry's role in the creation of the Church of England has been for generations the main focus for an understanding both of his personality and of his reign. That was the case for Geoffrey Dickens, writing after the Second World War, and for George Bernard in the early twenty-first century. Dickens was inclined to take Foxe's line, seeing the shifts in the King's position as a reflection of the influence of those about him, although he allowed a greater part for Henry's own uncertainties, as conservative instincts struggled with intellectual convictions. Dickens was concerned to demonstrate, as Foxe had been, that there was considerable support for Henry's actions among his subjects; a support which he was inclined to attribute to the early influence of Protestantism.²⁰ In this he was directly refuted by Christopher Haigh, who took the same line as Professors Scarisbrick and Duffy about the robust state of pre-reformation Catholicism. However, Dickens' thesis did have the advantage of offering a partial explanation for the relative lack of resistance to the King's policies – at least within the realm. For Professor Bernard, on the other hand, influences were beside the point. He argued at some length and with considerable erudition, that there were no inconsistencies to be explained. The King's position may have been idiosyncratic, and not have conformed to the models of Catholic and Protestant in which historians have dealt, but he was clear in his own mind where he wanted to be, and pursued his aim steadfastly.²¹

It is likely that this controversial view will herald a new round of more or less subtle interpretations of Henry's personality based on the events of the 1530s and on the emergence of his religious position. However, it must be remembered that he reigned for thirty-eight years, and did a great many other things apart from removing the Pope and imposing himself upon the English Church. There has always been a secular historiography, running alongside the religious one and interacting with it, but distinct in its priorities. Edward Hall's *Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of*

Lancastre and Yorke of 1548 follows on directly from the court writings of the early part of the reign.²² Hall was a dramatic writer, and created heightened pictorial images of the splendours of the reign, so the reader gets dramatic images of Henry at play, Henry at war, and as a dispenser of justice. The magnificence of his court knew no equal. In describing the King's marriage to Catherine of Aragon (an event which he may have witnessed, being twelve at the time), he excels himself in his portrait of Henry himself:

The features of his body, his goodly personage, his amiable visage, princely countenance, with the noble qualities of his royal estate, to every man known, needeth no rehearsal, considering, that for lack of cunning, I cannot express the gifts of grace and of nature, that God hath endowed him withal. Yet partly to describe his apparel, it is to be noted, his grace wore in his uppermost apparel, a robe of crimson velvet, furred with ermines, his jacket or coat of raised gold, the placard embroidered with diamonds, rubies, emeralds, great pearls, and other rich stones, a great bauderic about his neck, of great balasses. The trapper of his horse, damask gold, with a deep pursell of ermines, his knights and esquires for his body in crimson velvet, and all the gentlemen, with other of his chapel, and all his officers and household servants, were apparelled in scarlet ...²³

All this colour and opulence translates into qualities of moral and political superiority, so that the king can do no wrong. Henry thus emerges as the saviour of England, and the embodiment of its national pride and achievement. Hall invents freely; speeches, letters, and dramatic groupings of events, in a manner worthy of the humanist influences which were at work upon him. He interweaves narrative with dramatised scenes and dialogue, almost as if they were to be performed upon the stage. For example, in describing the pardon of the London apprentices after the Evil May Day riots in 1517 he explains how the prisoners were led through the streets, tied with ropes, amid the great mourning of their kinsfolk. Having executed thirteen of them out of hand by martial law, Henry is then persuaded by easy stages and the intervention of Queen Catherine to grant his gracious pardon to the

rest.²⁴ He thus at once becomes both the just and severe judge and the merciful father of his people. Hall is entirely justified in calling that part of his work 'The Triumphant Reigne of Kyng Henry VIII', because the King emerges as wise, powerful and magnificent. He was right to repudiate Queen Catherine, and right to suppress dissent against the Royal Supremacy by whatever means were ready to hand. Without entering into difficult questions like consent, Hall represents his subject as a glorious king, and one whom his daughter Elizabeth might worthily try to imitate. In so doing he set the tone for generations of historians to follow – Grafton, Stow, and Holinshed; even the conservative John Leland, who lamented the fall of the abbey, did not deny Henry his stature as a great king – although his work was not published until the eighteenth century.²⁵

Shakespeare treated Henry VIII with kid gloves, as became the father of the incumbent ruler. The play which he wrote with John Fletcher was (like *King John*) mainly a piece of anti-Catholic polemic, in which Wolsey was the villain and Henry the hero, but it is not a memorable portrait, being notable mainly for its justification of the Royal Supremacy.²⁶

Thereafter the King did not have a good press, as his bloodthirsty reputation gained the upper hand of his more positive achievements, and the gross Henry of 1546 overtook the attractive youth in the public imagination. The arbitrary enforcement of his will, notably against Anne Boleyn and Sir Thomas More, took precedence over more cautious appraisals of his use of the law and of Parliament, and he became a tyrant. A king who squandered the resources of his realm on pointless wars to feed his own ego, and who destroyed the Church to satisfy his craving for power. To J. A. Froude, writing in 1856, Henry was a king who did what he had to do to get rid of superstition and foreign interference, but that was already an old-fashioned point of view.²⁷ To the historians of the early twentieth century, and most notably to A. F. Pollard, Henry was a despot, who manipulated Parliament and public opinion in order to get his own way. He rode roughshod over the laws, executing anyone who displeased him, including his loyal servants Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell. He was a womaniser

who repudiated two wives and executed two others, and who sought to distract attention from his egocentric activities at home by waging pointless and expensive foreign wars. The country which he left behind him was impoverished and deeply divided.²⁸ This orthodoxy was challenged in the early 1950s by Geoffrey Elton. In 1953 he wrote:

There have been periods when the needs of 'good government' prevailed over the demands of 'free government', and of these the Tudor age was the most important. To speak of despotism and a reign of terror in sixteenth century England was easier for a generation which had not met these things at first hand; however, it remains true that it was a time when men were ready to be governed, and when order and peace seemed more important than principles and rights.²⁹

The Tudors were not despots, and did not have the weapons of despotism. Instead he proposed a 'revolution in government' over which Henry VIII presided. Henry was, he argued, a man of cloudy but statesmanlike vision who realised the limitations of his own power. Deeply imbued with the idea of the supremacy of the law, he was a meticulous observer of its forms, and at no time acted arbitrarily. He also respected the legislative function of Parliament, and never attempted to create law *mero moto suo*, however pressing the circumstances. Faced with the real and urgent need for a male heir, and convinced of the unlawfulness of his first marriage, he took the only course open to him when curial politics denied him the annulment which he needed. It was Thomas Cromwell rather than the King who converted his aspirations into concrete political action, but Henry was willingly led into a position where his potential authority eclipsed that of any of his predecessors.³⁰ This authority he then defended ruthlessly, but no more ruthlessly than the circumstances demanded, and his subjects accepted it because the alternative was civil strife, and because he had convinced them of the need for obedience. His action against the Church was also justified by this vision of a unified state under a single ruler. The Church was the greatest of the medieval franchises, and the King was entirely right to regard the clergy as 'only half his subjects'. In bringing them under

his effective rule he was taking one of the major steps needed for the creation of a modern state.³¹ The abolition of the secular franchises, the reform of the financial administration and the reshaping of the council, were also further steps carried out by Cromwell in pursuit of Henry's less precisely articulated ideal. The egotism which drove the mature Henry was clearly visible in the young man who had executed Empson and Dudley out of hand and waged a vainglorious and unnecessary war against France from 1512 to 1514. Thereafter the King was always short of money, which he looked to his servants to supply. Wolsey let him down in that respect in 1525, and that marked the beginning of the end for their confidential relationship, but Cromwell succeeded triumphantly by persuading him to dissolve the monasteries. Henry was always in charge, but not in any immediate sense. As a young man he was more interested in his amusements, particularly masking and hunting, and as his athleticism faded in later life he became preoccupied with theology and with foreign policy.³² Except for a few salient issues over which he felt it necessary to assert himself, such as the destruction of the Duke of Buckingham in 1521 and of Anne Boleyn and her followers in 1536, he was happy to leave the governance of the realm to others.

It was therefore Cromwell rather than the King who was the architect of the 'revolution in government' which saw the position of Parliament transformed from the medieval estates into a sovereign legislature, and patronage concentrated in the hands of the Lord Privy Seal. Administration was transformed from the personalised model of the later Middle Ages, when most power had been concentrated in the hands of the nobility and the royal household, into a more bureaucratic and 'modern' mode, focused in the offices of the King's leading servants, who were no longer primarily courtiers.³³ It was this change which led directly to the reform of the Privy Council, which instead of being a large and rather amorphous body of men, some of whom the King chose to consult much more regularly than others, became much more like a cabinet of senior office holders, who met regularly and transacted a defined body of business.³⁴ Elton's influence was

immediate and overwhelming, thanks largely to his teaching position at Cambridge University and the large number of graduate students whom he supervised on 'constitutional' subjects. However, the 'revolution in government' was also controversial from the start. Medievalists like Gerald Harriss attacked the whole idea of radical change, proposing instead that the 1530s had merely seen a reversion to a Lancastrian style of government, as opposed to the more personalised style favoured by the House of York.³⁵ Although Harriss was prepared to concede that Henry had gone a step further than Richard II in repudiating the Pope's authority, he could not see any difference in principle between the Royal Supremacy and the Act of Praemunire of 1393.

Others followed Harriss with more or less vehemence, but it was one of Elton's own students who attacked the 'revolution', not on the basis of medieval precedent, but directly as an interpretation of the 1530s. It was, David Starkey argued, a mistake to see Cromwell's reforms in terms of bureaucracy. What he was doing was creating a personal empire in the King's service, concentrating administration in his own hands. The political focus, meanwhile, remained at the court, and particularly in the Privy Chamber.³⁶ This had the advantage of explaining why the centre of business shifted from the office of King's Secretary to that of Lord Privy Seal when Cromwell was promoted, and ultimately of accounting for Cromwell's own fall by invoking the political infighting of the court. Particularly after Cromwell's execution, control of the Privy Chamber, and with it of access to the King, becomes critical to an understanding of public events. This thesis also offered a more satisfactory explanation of the fact that the changes in the Privy Council did not take place until after Cromwell's fall. If they had been brought about by his own initiative, they could be expected to have taken place between 1536 and 1538. If, however, they were the King's idea and designed to reduce his minister's personal control, it would make perfect sense that the latter had dragged his feet over implementing them – so that they took full effect only after he had gone.³⁷ Although prepared to concede on points of emphasis, and to admit that he had neglected the court, on his main Cromwellian thesis Geoffrey Elton remained unrepentant, and

twenty years later produced another revolutionary minister. Where he had previously presented a man of constitutional vision, well aware that he was creating a monarchy potentially limited by Parliament in a fashion that Henry simply did not understand, in *Reform and Renewal* (1973) Cromwell became a man of social and economic idealism, aiming to reshape the commonwealth by increasing the role of central government.³⁸ This thesis was in turn attacked, most notably by Penry Williams, who could see in the minister's actions no constructive vision, but rather a series of *ad hoc* responses to immediate crises. Elton again defended his position in a series of cogent articles. In all this debate, the King remained more a looming presence than an active protagonist, neither a despot nor a 'constitutional' monarch, but rather responding to domestic issues as he was prompted. He was, however, dominant, and his erratic interventions could never be accurately predicted. No one could take a decisive initiative without Henry's active consent, a point made more effectively by Elton's opponents than by Elton himself.³⁹ Eventually he did produce a more subtle and nuanced picture of Thomas Cromwell, but again Henry remains largely in the background.

Meanwhile, in 1968, another Elton pupil, Jack Scarisbrick, had published what still remains the definitive biography of the King. This he described as being neither a 'private life' nor a comprehensive study of the reign, but rather something in between. What emerges is a thoroughgoing account of Henry's achievements, not only his refashioning of the Church in his own image, but his restructuring (with Cromwell's help) of the governance of the realm, his creation of the English navy, and his self-created role in European diplomacy.⁴⁰ There he consistently punched above his weight and was taken seriously by both the major powers of the first half of the sixteenth century, France and the Empire. France he attacked three times without obvious provocation, winning (temporarily) no more than 'ungracious dogholes', but maintaining the image of a warrior upon which he relied for his influence. He was interested in ballistics, and with warlike ambitions in mind, transformed the English gunfounding industry.⁴¹ He even fought a somewhat notional war against the Emperor from 1526 to 1529 in

the interests of maintaining the balance of power which protected him, and thus made doubly sure that Charles V would oppose any move which he might make in Rome to secure the annulment of his marriage. Against Scotland, a lesser power whom he could be accused of bullying, he fought twice – and almost a third time. The first time he was not the aggressor, and was totally victorious, but the second occasion was unprovoked aggression, which resulted in a fierce and futile campaign for a union of the crowns.⁴² On every occasion the King's motives for fighting were entirely personal, and expressed the interests of England only to the extent that he represented the realm. It was accepted at the time that war and peace were entirely matters for the King to decide, but when it came to paying for these adventures the Parliament had a legitimate interest, and what was said there did not always make comfortable hearing.

Henry spent money like water, not only on war but on his entertainments and most especially on his building programme. Sometimes this could be justified in terms of security, as with the south coast forts in 1539, and sometimes by the need for a residence in a particular place, as was the case with the palace of Bridewell, upon which work proceeded from 1515 to 1522. But for the most part it was to gratify the royal whim. Neither Oatlands nor Nonsuch nor St James' were really needed, but the King built restlessly to satisfy his craving for magnificence – a craving which inspired so many actions during his reign.⁴³ The king who emerges from this exhaustive study is first and foremost an egotist; a man determined to have his own way, and adept at convincing himself that that way was justified. When he was concentrating, his intelligence was formidable, and he had a miscellaneous range of accomplishments from fluent Latin to a mean hand on the lute. In the first half of his reign, his concentration wandered quite a lot, which gave the impression that his councillors – and particularly Cardinal Wolsey – were really running the country. This was a mistake, as no one knew better than Wolsey, because when the King chose to assert himself his grasp was formidable and his anger devastating. After Wolsey's fall there followed a period of some

three years which earlier historians had dubbed 'the years without a policy'. Scarisbrick demonstrates that Henry did indeed have a policy, or rather a succession of policies, each of which was frustrated in turn, leaving him eventually with an option which he did not know how to implement.⁴⁴ Hence the importance of Thomas Cromwell, and here Professor Scarisbrick is inclined to follow Elton, at least part of the way. Henry knew where he wanted to go (and was morally convinced of his rectitude) but needed a 'ways and means' man to convert his aspirations into reality. When it came to dealing with the Church the King found his jurisdictional radicalism at odds with his sacramental conservatism. The humanist and the orthodox aspects of his upbringing coming into conflict for the first time. So we have a monarch arguing theology with the Pope, and convincing himself that he was a better Catholic than Clement VII. When it came to the point, he was able to shrug off his excommunication, and he carried the majority of his subjects with him because of the way in which he had succeeded in projecting himself as a great king who cared for his realm.⁴⁵

Henry could be bounced into ruthless decisions if he felt that his will was being defied or deliberately evaded. He also had a streak of superstition in his make up, which made him sensitive to the prophecies of Elizabeth Barton, and persuaded him that his second wife was guilty of witchcraft. In spite of a protracted (and now somewhat dated) discussion of the theology of the divorce, and great deal of attention to foreign policy, the king who emerges from this study is a believable person – intelligent, arrogant and self-centred. He is vulnerable to criticism but at a somewhat impersonal level. It was left to Eric Ives in his two magisterial studies of Anne Boleyn (1986 and 2004) to bring out Henry's fragility at a more intimate level. He was, Ives argues, sexually insecure, which made him uniquely sensitive to Anne's thoughtless jibes of intermittent impotence. They were true, and Henry knew they were true, but they were completely at odds with his self-projection as a virile and masculine king.⁴⁶ He may well have believed the charges of witchcraft, because they offered a means of explaining this phenomenon which avoided reflection upon the King himself. The wicked woman could turn him on and off

like a tap, and he had been too blind to see it! At first sight this thesis of insecurity does not fit with the image of magnificent self-assurance projected by Holbein, but upon further investigation they turn out to be two sides of the same coin. The chivalric bravado with which Henry entered the lists as a young man make good sense as a cover for one who knew his actual performance to be erratic. At first he seems to have had no difficulty in getting his wife pregnant on an annual basis, but by 1522 he had fathered only one bastard in spite of two lengthy liaisons, and perhaps other casual affairs that we know nothing about. Foreign ambassadors were always reporting his alleged 'amours', but these seem to have been no more than the conventional gestures of courtly love, and in fact Henry was nothing like the potent young man in whom he wanted his courtiers to believe.⁴⁷

A similar insecurity, projected onto the more public arena of state affairs, may help to explain his ruthlessness when crossed. As Scarisbrick observes, not even those apparently most secure in the King's favour could be sure that expediency would not turn him against them. The fate of Thomas Cromwell was a stark warning. However, Diarmaid MacCulloch's work on Thomas Cranmer presents yet another Henry, one who on this occasion was loyal to his friend through thick and thin. There were good reasons why the King should have trusted his Archbishop, not least because of the unquestioning devotion with which Cranmer followed him. He could disagree with Henry in a manner which no one else could venture to do, and was excused attendance at the Parliament which passed the Act of Six Articles because the King knew that was repugnant to his conscience.⁴⁸ Since the contents of the Act reflect Henry's own conscience exactly, this reaction suggests a flexibility and tolerance which would not normally be associated with so touchy and explosive a ruler. One of the charges normally levelled against the King arises from just this type of inconsistency. Although it has long been recognised that Henry hated Lutherans and detested sacramentarians even more, the way in which he blew hot and cold on other aspects of the reform programme has long puzzled historians. As we have seen, John Foxe ascribed it to conflicting council, and

Scarisbrick is inclined to take the same view, but it is equally plausible to argue that the division was within the King's own mind. He authorised the English Bible, and insisted on its being set up in parish churches for 'all to read on that would', and then attempted to restrict such access to the gentry. Apparently he was alarmed by the manner in which it was being 'rhymed and jingled', as though he had never thought of such a possibility.⁴⁹ He apparently supported Cromwell's negotiations with Tyndale and Barnes, and made use of their arguments, but eventually had Barnes burned for heresy and passed the highly conservative Six Articles, which he then partly inhibited his bishops from enforcing.

In his latest attempt to resolve this conundrum, *The King's Reformation* (2005), George Bernard argues that the problem is more apparent than real. The King's religious position was always consistent, even before his Great Matter arrived to disturb the surface. He believed in the unity of the Church, and had even written in defence of the papacy as the upholder of that unity, but as a result of his experience in dealing with Clement VII he partly changed his mind. The papacy was a political office, like any other, and Clement was so highly politicised that he was forgetting his duty as a Father in God. Unless or until the office was purged of its corruptions and returned to its earlier purity, it would be better for the unity of the Church to be preserved by a consensus of Christian princes – like himself.⁵⁰ He was a Catholic king, and it was his responsibility to maintain the faith within his domains. This meant exercising his own judgement over issues in controversy, a judgement which he firmly believed would be informed by the Holy Spirit. He encouraged evangelicals because he believed their teaching to be in accordance with that of the early Church, but persecuted heretics because theirs was not. The apparent reaction of 1540–42 was in reality nothing of the kind; it was merely the reassertion in a public format of that sacramental doctrine to which Henry had always been loyal. Appearances of vacillation were deceptive, because the King had always steered a humanist course, getting rid of the 'abbey lubbers' upon whom Erasmus had poured such scorn, and bringing the clergy under control while continuing to have a healthy respect for their true

vocation.⁵¹ It was, and always had been, the prime responsibility of the clergy to minister to the spiritual needs of the people, not to concern themselves with offices, or property or profits. In imposing his own discipline upon them, he was recalling them to a true sense of their duties, undermining only their political pretensions. This is a Henry whose strength of purpose has not always been apparent to other historians, and is already leading to a fresh round of controversy, but it has at least the merit of contradicting that school of thought which sees the King as merely a weakling, confused in his mind and determined only to be obeyed in his own backyard.

Physically, Henry deteriorated in later life, as is only too apparent from the suits of armour made for him at different stages and of growing corpulence. A number of years ago Lacey Baldwin Smith argued that the savage moods to which he became prone in the 1540s were a direct result of that deterioration, and particularly of the pain which he suffered from ulcerated legs.⁵² This disability had long been attributed to venereal disease, contracted in the course of a supposedly wild and promiscuous youth. However, such promiscuity was a myth, and Smith argued convincingly that the real cause of the ulcers which so troubled him was repeated falls in the lists and in the hunting field, which we know that he suffered as a young man. They seem to have baffled the skill of the best physicians in the land, and occasionally seem to have closed up, causing the sufferer exquisite pain, and causing rumours to circulate that the King was dying.⁵³ Henry was already overweight and eating too much by 1530, and the gradual change of lifestyle from athlete to couch potato, which took place between 1529 and 1539 has caused one of the most recent studies of the King – *The Virtuous Prince*, (2008) by David Starkey – to propose that there were really two Henrys, and that the brutal tyrant of the 1530s and 1540s was the result of the traumatising impact of the Great Matter upon an otherwise fairly amiable young man.⁵⁴ In spite of the wealth of detail with which the thesis is supported, this seems to be too simple an explanation of a very complex man, although it is possible that the second volume on the mature Henry (which has not yet appeared) will resolve that issue.

The most balanced summary of Henry's character to appear so far is that contributed by Eric Ives to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Ives points out that much of the story of his reign is explained by the need to accommodate his particular vision of personal monarchy, which developed progressively in a number of stages throughout his life.⁵⁵ He continued to seek an answer to the question, what did it mean to be a king under God? In that search he drew on the thinking of a number of different people – Edward Fox, Thomas Cranmer, Anne Boleyn, and Thomas Cromwell in particular – and that seems to have given him the confidence to proceed as he did in and after 1533. Henry was incapable of original or radical thinking, but he was capable of radical action once he had been persuaded. However there was a sense in which all this confidence was a fraud, a mere public show upheld by falsity and deceit, because what it concealed was a gnawing self-doubt. It was the brief exposure of that self-doubt by the behaviour of Catherine Howard which caused such emotional storms at the end of 1541.⁵⁶ Like Smith, Ives sees the 1540s as a period of growing personal insecurity, not least because of his deteriorating health. As death approached, Henry took refuge in an increasingly bellicose self-righteousness. Not only, he observes, were the earlier changes road-tested after 1540, but 'the legacy of these years substantially determined the agenda for the next twenty', and in many ways he left an evil inheritance. His realm was in debt because of his wars, and deeply divided in religion, a division reflected in the in-fighting of the court over the last five years of his life. When he died at the not very advanced age of fifty-six, he left his kingdom to a child, and a vast quantity of personal possessions, which, when inventoried, amounted to some 20,000 items. Everything he had done was, or appeared to be, more than life sized. His appetite for money, food and women appeared to be insatiable. He was immensely greedy of power, and dealt savagely with anyone who challenged him. He defied the Pope, the Emperor and the King of France, and yet remained unsatisfied. His craving for glory turned in upon itself as his once-magnificent body decayed. However, his legacy was more than one of monumental selfishness, and his achievements outlasted his personality.

Neither Parliament nor the Church of England nor the navy would ever be the same again, and although it was Elizabeth's religious settlement rather than her father's which was to endure, that would not have been possible without his initiative. Jack Scarisbrick's conclusion, that 'rarely, if ever, have the unawareness and irresponsibility of a king proved more costly of material benefits to his people', is in need of a certain revision.⁵⁷

The historiography of Henry VIII is therefore an ongoing operation, not merely for the learned but also for the population at large. It is embodied in articles, in books, and in film and television presentations. We have moved a long way from Gasquet and Pollard (to say nothing of Jolin Foxe), just as we have moved on from *The Private Lives of Henry VIII* when Charles Laughton represented that self-indulgent monarch. For that very reason, we are in danger of reinventing Henry to suit the ideas of our own generation. He was, in his own mind, a very moral and upright man as well as the model of a Christian Prince, and we should beware of attributing those convictions to self-deception. To his subjects he was not a psychological dilemma, but he was a great and terrifying king, and however much we may wish to gloss our interpretation of his actions, that contemporary image should always be born in mind. 'Everybody loved him,' wrote Polydore Vergil of the young Henry, 'and their affection was not half hearted.'⁵⁸

I

THE PRINCE, 1491-1509

The story of Henry VIII begins long before his birth. That he was the heir to the throne of England from 1502 to 1509 goes back to the strange story of his father's lineage. The older Henry was born in 1457, the only child of Edmund Tudor, Earl of Richmond, and of his young wife Margaret, the daughter of John Beaufort, Duke of Somerset.¹ Edmund owed his title to the fact that he was the acknowledged half-brother of King Henry VI, having been born of the union between Owen Tudor of Penmynydd and Catherine de Valois, the widow of King Henry V. Both the timing and circumstances of that union are obscure, but Henry VI had no difficulty in recognising it as a marriage, and consequently accepted Edmund as a kinsman. This meant that although Henry was born into the royal family, he had not the slightest claim upon the Crown of England. Had it not been for the Salic Law, he would have had a better claim to the throne of France. His mother, on the other hand was a granddaughter of John Beaufort, Marquis of Somerset and Dorset, and consequently a great granddaughter of John of Gaunt, the third son of King Edward III. Unfortunately John Beaufort had been born while his mother, Catherine Swynford, was still the Duke of Lancaster's mistress, before she became his third wife. Whereas that marriage had legitimated him in the canon law, such legitimacy did not