



Henry VI's Kingship: Historians' Verdicts

As you read each of the extracts, think about the following questions:

- Does the author have anything positive to say about Henry VI? Is it about his kingship or character, or does that dichotomy not exist?
- How does the author explain the failures of Henry VI's reign?
- Is Henry active or passive?
- Are the problems of his kingship the result of those around him?
- What are the differences in these historians' interpretations?

K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford, 1973) p. 284

This talk of the overmighty subjects as if it were a chronic disease does less than justice to the vigour of the later medieval kingship In Henry VI second childhood succeeded first without the usual interval and under him the medieval kingship was in abeyance.

B. P. Wolffe, *Henry VI* (Methuen, 1981) pp. 8-18, 210, 238, 332

There is no doubt that Henry's failures as a king, which have to be discussed at length in this book, left Eton College and King's College, Cambridge as almost the sole record of his achievements It is inconceivable that certain unpalatable basic facts of Henry's rule can have been completely forgotten by the date when the Blacman tract [presenting Henry as a saint] was compiled and indeed traces of them can still be discerned through the hagiographic mist. It was the fact that policies, actions and attitudes of his had brought great trouble and harm to his subjects which dictated the portrayal of one who was not personally responsible, though such a claim was foreign to the very nature of fifteenth-century kingship A series of parliamentary acts of resumption [reclaiming estates previously granted by the king] had been necessary to try to undo the damage which his exercise of his powers of patronage had done to the substance of the monarchy; this could only be portrayed as selfless generosity Between 1444 and 1453 Henry presided over the liquidation of our first overseas empire and by his policies provoked the first significant revolt among his subjects for three-quarters of a century. [Describes a failed conspiracy in 1452 to overthrow Henry by men of Kent, Wales and Shropshire] Undoubtedly the fact that

Henry occupied the throne by virtue of the usurpation of his grandfather Henry VI in 1399 was remembered throughout his reign, but here in 1452 he was to be deposed, not for a deficient title, but for his unsuitability and inefficiency.

Undoubtedly Henry himself bore the ultimate responsibility for the loss of Normandy, brought about by his marriage and truce policy of 1444 and the means by which it was implemented and continued up to the summer of 1449.

[Describes Cade's Rebellion of 1450] He had handled rebellion at home as badly as he had previously managed the affairs of his French kingdom in the loss of which lay the basic cause of all his troubles from 1449.

The Yorkist lords had rescued the kingdom from the consequences of Henry's 'inanity'¹, that most apt description of his predominant mental state, at least since 1455.

1. Quote from McFarlane (1965)

Ralph Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI* (Ernest Benn, 1981), pp. 248-54

Henry VI was capable of taking a sustained, positive, sometimes intelligent and constructive, interest in affairs, provided they were to his liking. Military affairs were not . . . Henry proved to be a generous young king – generous to a fault . . . the extent and permanence of his grants quickly impoverished the crown financially and weakened its control over local administration in several parts of the realm . . . these were the years that witnessed Henry's energetic promotion of educational foundations and peace with France, and his conscious attempt to promote the interests of the royal family. The king's personality was in large part determining the actions of his government in these most active years of his personal rule . . . Nor can the king be relieved of at least some of the responsibility for the English attack on the Breton fortress of Fougères in 1449, which catapulted England into the final struggle with Charles VII. It may have been prompted in part by Henry's sense of personal outrage at the imprisonment of his boyhood friend, Gilles of Brittany, to whom Henry was devoted . . . Judging consequences and implications was not Henry's *forte*. . . .

Henry's energetic judicial tours in 1450-51 after Cade's rebellion were unprecedentedly severe for this reign, with a 'harvyste of hedys' garnered by the king himself in Kent, and 'great justice' meted out by him elsewhere. The king was truly shocked by the rising, but even more by the mutiny of his own forces and the murder of some of his closest companions The common view of Henry as a king whose sole aim was to practice the virtues of 'charity, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance' is a long way from the reality. . . . Henry VI was in reality, a well-intentioned man, with aspirations that were laudable enough, in an

age when kings could not rule by good intentions alone . . . He was extravagant, credulous, over-merciful and compassionate to those at fault, yet fearfully suspicious of those who were rumoured to be doing him personal harm . . . And with his naively defective judgement, Henry's advisers were too often unworthy of his confidence.

Christine Carpenter, *The Wars of the Roses. Politics and the Constitution in England, c. 1437-1509* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) pp. 93-114

It will, in fact, be suggested here, on the basis of some very recent and revolutionary work on the reign by John Watts . . . that Henry VI was not responsible for any part of the rule that occurred in his name during the 1440s, either at home or abroad, but that the consequence of this was not the triumph of 'evil counsel' but rather a concerted effort to put a semblance of monarchy in the void created by the absence of an active king. . . . Those who had readiest access to the king . . . could hardly have failed to realise that what they had was a royal façade covering the actual rule of [the earl of] Suffolk, not the real thing. But the nobility may have been happy to persuade themselves that all was well . . . it can be shown that Suffolk's policies in France found acceptance amongst all the lords, with the exception of [Humphrey Duke of] Gloucester: the greater nobility who were in England were involved at every stage of the process that was to determine the fate of the English in France. . . . The lack of leadership in England was the prime cause of the lack of forward planning for France from 1444-9. It also led to the confusion of negotiating positions which hampered the efforts to secure a more permanent peace

. . . a nobility badly divided by internal feuds could hardly have co-operated over the war . . . However there were undeniably serious flaws in the internal administration of England in the 1440s . . . Unless Suffolk was to put a permanent guard on the king, there was no means of stopping others, beyond those who were authorised, getting to the king and persuading him to append his sign [to grants]

The Commons . . . had been voting, and paying, taxes in huge quantities that led to ignominious defeat and they wanted to know why . . . The nobility . . . were confronted by the fact that they had made a series of decisions, or at least agreed to them, each one inexorably dictated by the last, that had led to total disaster in France, and that the nation was now calling for heads to roll. The evidence is that they decided to make Suffolk the sacrificial victim . . . They then had to rewrite the history of the 1440s, something which [the duke of] York himself was to do in the 1450s and the Yorkist chroniclers were to complete after 1461.

**James Ross, *Henry VI. A Good, Simple and Innocent Man* (Penguin, 2016)
'Introduction'**

While the argument is sophisticated and the conclusions on the political culture of English politics at the time are of great interest, Watts's view of Henry himself has not been accepted by many historians. Indeed, recent accounts of Henry have emphasized the evidence that shows Henry's active decision-making. . . This book . . . will show an 'occasional' king; a man who could on occasion, assert his royal will and make decisions, but whose interests were not those of most medieval kings, being far more focused on his afterlife than his actual life, whose faith, piety and spirituality were far more important to him than the administration, warfare and politics that comprised the essence of late-medieval kingship. His different priorities and only occasional engagement with the vital task of governance were directly, though not solely, responsible for the disasters that engulfed England during his reign.

Lauren Johnson, *Shadow King. The Life and Death of Henry VI* (Head of Zeus, 2019) pp. 555-7

He was kind-hearted, charitable, generous to a fault, but he was never strong-willed nor focused enough to fulfil the hopes invested in him. Henry knew off by heart the lessons he had learnt in his education about what a king *should* be, but he never witnessed what a king really was, the core of steel necessary at the heart of a medieval monarch.

Henry also, perhaps, took the wrong lessons from his education. He believed that peace was a cardinal virtue and chastity and self-denial crucial for a ruler: after all, if you could not rule yourself, how could you rule others? . . . due to Henry's inattention, disorder engulfed his realms. This gave Henry's rivals – from Cade to York to Warwick to Edward IV – clear opportunities to tap into popular dissatisfaction.

Yet it is worth remembering that for a remarkably long time even those of Henry's subjects who had seen, at first hand, that he was not up to the job refused to deprive him of his throne . . . Exasperation with Henry's rule was consistently tempered with affection for Henry himself . . . the legacy of warfare Henry V left his son was acknowledged even by his most admiring contemporaries as problematic . . . The fundamental difference between father and son was that Henry VI could neither rejoice in, nor justify, a victory that entailed suffering as his father could. His inclination for mercy and peace put him out of step with man of his contemporaries and it is a terrible irony that a man so devoted to peace was the trigger for the bloodiest battle in English history.

Having read all of the passages, some more questions to consider:

- Why might it be so difficult to reach conclusions about Henry VI's kingship from the surviving sources?
- If we accept Griffiths's and Ross's 'occasional' king, is there still a place in the explanation for Carpenter's and Watts's depiction of the nobility?
- Is Johnson's depiction compatible with those immediately before?
- Johnson suggests that Henry VI remained king for so long because there was genuine affection for him – can you think of other evidence of such affection? Can you think of alternative explanations for his nobles' unwillingness to overthrow him?
- How can we examine these interpretations further?