The Personification of Power in Henry VIII

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UCCEEDING HIS FATHER, the founder of the new Tudor dynasty, just two months short of his eighteenth birthday, Henry VIII already coveted a place in the pantheon of history. His quasi-regal manner had been remarked on even before his elder brother, Arthur – succumbing to a fever shortly after marrying a beautiful young Spanish bride, Catherine of Aragon – had died. A younger son wasn't born to rule, but when, in 1499, the leading Dutch scholar, Erasmus of Rotterdam, had visited him – then still only eight – he had found his self-assurance, his potential for greatness, worthy of a comparison with Alexander the Great.

Henry began his reign with a flurry of grand gestures, determined to distance himself from the old regime and sending two of his father's most hated ministers to the Tower before executing them (cat. 18). Armed, next, with a bull of dispensation from Pope Julius II, he took Catherine, his brother's widow, as the first of his six wives, declaring himself to be deeply in love, overruling all objections to the match from his father's older, wiser councilors, quarrelling with them again when they tried to curb his prodigal spending.

Processing through the streets of London in his coronation robes and jewels, the young Henry dressed to impress.[1] Six feet two inches tall, and as lean as he was fit before gluttony caused him to bulge, he dazzled and delighted his subjects. He was the personification of monarchy, the fount of honor, his only flaw his inability, like his father before him, to look people straight in the eye.[2] Public displays enabled him to exploit the awesome potential of his person and image. The symbolism of royal palaces, elaborate court protocol and outdoor spectacles, even a simple message delivered by a royal official wearing a livery chain or badge, instilled an aura of submission in Henry's subjects, inviting unquestioning obedience. A king's coronation – at which the monarch was anointed with holy oil like an archbishop – was regarded as the "eighth" sacrament of the church, creating a priest-king whose will must be obeyed, whose sacral powers included "touching" for the "king's evil" and the consecration of cramp rings (i.e., it was believed that Henry could cure scrofula by the laying-on of hands, and that his touch provided rings of gold and silver with a protective power against epilepsy and muscular diseases).[3]

"Our king's heart is set not upon gold or jewels or mines of ore," Lord Mountjoy rhapsodized on the eve of the coronation, "but upon virtue, reputation and eternal fame."[4] Principally a man of action, Henry was an energetic and accomplished sportsman, a superb athlete excelling at jousting, tilting and hunting, at archery, wrestling and tennis. An indefatigable horseman, he liked to ride for miles every day of the week, his heart full of chivalric ardor and martial zeal. Highly competitive in war and peace, he expected to win at whatever he did. His power sprang from his "magnificence" – his physique, his material wealth, his fashionable dress – as much as from the law-courts, Parliament or the deference of the Church. Monarchy was still dynastic, and Henry's rule was no exception.

Besides his physical accomplishments, Henry was well-educated and intelligent: a fluent speaker of Latin and French with a smattering of Italian and Spanish, able to converse readily with visiting ambassadors and – despite a limited attention span – something of an expert on theology, music, astronomy and maps. Thomas More, for a number of years the king's secretary before becoming lord chancellor, discussed texts as varied as Euclid's *Geometry* and the decrees of Church Councils with him; More also was aroused from his bed at midnight on cloudless nights so that Henry could gaze at the stars. A keen patron of singers and organists in his Chapel Royal, always seeking out the very best performers and bringing them, if necessary, from abroad, Henry could sing at sight and play the lute and virginals, composing several of his own songs.

As to his private character, childhood indulgence meant Henry's anger might easily be aroused if he felt himself crossed or deceived, but at first this trait was masked. In general, he sought power and glory, craving adulation, brooding over petty slights. He was emotionally predatory, sulking for days if disappointed. Until 1527 or so, while his first chief minister, Cardinal Wolsey, was at his zenith and Henry spent much of his own time amusing himself, he was largely affable and amenable, willing to trust his councilors or give them the benefit of the doubt. Wolsey, working mainly at Westminster, where the law courts and fiscal departments were based, was able to make solid advances in such spheres as justice, taxation and economic policy, although the royal court remained the crucible of power, since no adequate distinction existed as yet between the departments of state and royal government – all were the king's. Ministers, too, were Henry's alone, accountable to him and not to Parliament, since Parliament was still an exclusively royal institution which Henry summoned and dissolved at will.

It follows that a minister who fell victim to hubris or paid insufficient attention to events at court, as Wolsey eventually did, could run into serious trouble. At the great religious festivals, chiefly Christmas and Whitsuntide, Henry sat in state at one or other of his palaces wearing his golden crown and purple robes, flanked by his nobles, bishops and

leading councilors, before processing in majesty to the Chapel Royal to hear Mass. At other times, his ministers kept him abreast of affairs by correspondence, making visits to court usually on Sundays. Henry's in-letters, from English ambassadors abroad as well as his ministers, were read aloud to him by his secretaries, who drafted replies on lines the king dictated before signature. The king's signature (or "sign manual") was fundamental to most aspects of government: grants of land or cash and appointments to royal and judicial offices were solely at Henry's will and pleasure. Documents could be held in a queue for weeks, and often months, if he changed his mind, or didn't feel like signing his name for any reason.

The opulence of Henry's court was extraordinary. (See especially cat. 35 and 36.) When he died, he possessed over sixty houses, the furnishings of which included over 2,000 tapestries, over 150 panel paintings, and 2,028 pieces of gold or silver plate.[5] A dozen or so of his larger palaces, mostly in the vicinity of London between Greenwich and Windsor along the River Thames, were kept constantly furnished: vast mazes of rooms with separate royal apartments for the king and queen, great halls, long galleries, libraries, studies, jewel-houses, chapels, loggias, privy gardens, lodgings for courtiers, and even (at Whitehall) gateways modeled on Roman triumphal arches. Henry VIII was highly acquisitive, and his approach was the same in foreign policy, where he proclaimed his intention of conquering the throne of France, personally leading two formidable invasions at the head of his armies, rebuilding the royal navy and projecting himself as a warrior-king like Edward III and Henry V. After Francis I, a ruler of equal flamboyance and ambition, became King of France in 1515, he and Henry would become rivals for the rest of their lives. (See cat. 44–49.) If Francis built magnificent new palaces, so did Henry. If Francis attracted the finest musicians, poets or architects to his court, then so must Henry. They sought to outbid each other over tapestries and artistic patronage, even if Henry could never cap Francis in attracting Leonardo da Vinci to stay or in keeping the *Mona Lisa* in his bathroom.

Henry had no desire to challenge the pope at first, considering himself to be a devoted son of the Catholic Church. When, in 1517, Martin Luther attacked papal power and Catholic doctrine, Henry took up his pen to defend the orthodox faith in a book entitled *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* (*A Defense of the Seven Sacraments*) (cat. 57–58). Of course, Henry wanted a special title from the pope to reinforce the sacral aspects of his kingship. Early in his reign, he had tried to get Pope Julius to strip the King of France of his traditional title of "Most Christian King" and grant it to Henry instead. In return, Henry and Wolsey backed much of the pope's foreign policy – although adapting it, where necessary, to suit Henry's personal requirements – and when Pope Leo X received signed copies of

the *Assertio*, he awarded Henry the title of "Defender of the Faith," which (as Wolsey artfully advised) trumped that of "Most Christian King." (See cat. 59 and 60.)

Power could be raw and brutal in the sixteenth century, and so could Henry. In 1521, the same year as he obtained his title from the pope, he put the Duke of Buckingham, the country's premier nobleman, on trial on trumped-up treason charges (cat. 27). He had come to mistrust him and wanted him dead. The Duke, it was said, was plotting to seize the throne, and when one of his disgruntled servants came forward to claim, on the basis of hearsay, that the Duke was ready to rebel, Henry moved in for the kill, fearing – like his father before him – the threat of baronial revolt leading to regicide. The Duke protested that his trial was rigged, for Henry interviewed and even coached the witnesses beforehand, forcing information out of Buckingham's chaplain and so breaking the seal of the confessional. But no one was prepared to speak out and say Henry was mistaken, or that his justice was a sham. It was a defining moment, teaching Henry that, rather than bypassing the law or Parliament as his father had sometimes done at a high cost to his reputation – Henry VII had once sent a letter ordering an alteration to be made, retrospectively, to an Act of Parliament[6] – he could subvert it, getting everything he wanted, apparently legally.

By 1527, Catherine had passed the menopause and Henry still lacked a legitimate male heir, a matter of vital concern for any dynastic monarchy. Henry and Catherine had an eleven-year-old daughter, Princess Mary, and Henry had by Elizabeth ("Bessie") Blount an illegitimate son, whom he created Duke of Richmond. Catherine had a long history of stillbirths and miscarriages: a young son, created Prince of Wales, had died at the age of seven weeks. Henry, meanwhile, lusted after Anne Boleyn, even sending his new secretary, William Knight, to Rome behind Wolsey's back to seek the necessary dispensations to marry her. It was a barefaced request, and yet royal matrimonial annulments were not uncommon, and all might have been resolved quickly had not Henry insisted on a divorce as a matter of principle, dictating the terms on which Pope Clement VII was meant to proceed, and taking the argument away from matrimonial law into the hypersensitive realm of papal *versus* kingly power.

After finally breaking with Rome to marry Anne, Henry in 1534 went on to declare himself the "Supreme Head of the English Church," seeking to reinforce and blend traditional ideas of sacral monarchy with audacious biblical and classical prototypes giving deeper, more autocratic resonances to the phrase "the imperial Crown." According to these new prototypes, England was an "empire" (cat. 85): one "entire" and "complete" of itself, meaning all secular and ecclesiastical jurisdictions were subject to Henry as God's deputy on earth, who legislated in Parliament for both Church and State and was ac-