

New Monarchy Economics: Power Centralization in York and Tudor England (1461 – 1509)

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A subject of great debate amongst York and Tudor historians has been whether Henry VII's reign marked a transitional period that laid the foundation for the "revolutionary" reign of Henry VIII and the later Tudors. British historian G. R. Elton argued that Thomas Cromwell pioneered changes that led to bureaucratic governance and the first modern nation state,¹ but other scholars have consistently found that this view discredits the influence of both Henry VIII and previous English monarchs. Historian Steven Gunn has argued in the tradition of K.B. McFarlane that centralization tactics implemented under Henry VII's reign were precipitated by similar developments during Edward IV's tenure.² Yet, too few works solely consider what developments under York rulers were maintained by the first Tudor king. The controversial nature of Henry VIII's reign understandably overshadows that of both his father and their York forbears in historical literature. Still, the events that culminated in the assertion of the divine right of the monarch with the Act of Supremacy in 1534 emerged rather suddenly in comparison to the gradual centralization of regnal political authority in England.³ The extant sources on York and early Tudor rule suggest that these gradual improvements, primarily in the form of economic policies, consolidated power under the Crown while modernizing outmoded English institutions and practices.

Scholarship directly pondering the continuity of economic policy in the regimes of Edward IV and Henry VII is both scant and scattered, but the occurrence has not gone without note. Many scholars, since at least J.R. Green in the mid-19th century, mention the era's consistency; yet typically these are sections (with wide variation in detail) found as part of larger works that rarely have an explicit focus on the subject.⁴ This has largely been attributed to the fact that most scholars who have commented on this period have done so under the banner of late medieval or early modern history.⁵ The result has been an emphasis on different methodologies and primary sources that makes synthesizing the two perspectives difficult. Of course, there are exceptions to the rule. The recently deceased Roger Lockyer, previously a lecturer at the University of London, held that there was "little that was new about the reign of either monarch."⁶ Furthermore, a collection of essays titled *The End of the Middle Ages?* contains essential discussions on various aspects of English society and governance in the late medieval

¹ Geoffrey R. Elton, *A History of England in Eight Volumes*, vol. 4: *England under the Tudors*, ed. Sir Charles Oman (London: Meuthen and Company, 1955).

² Steven Gunn, "The Structures of Politics in Early Tudor England," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5 (1995), 59-90 at 62.

³ Jack J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 324.

⁴ John R. Green, *A Short History of the English People* (London: Macmillan Publishing, 1874), 302.

⁵ Steven Gunn, "Henry VII in Context: Problems and Possibilities," *History* 92 (2007): 301-17 at 303.

⁶ Roger Lockyer, *Tudor and Stuart Britain, 1471-1714* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), 31.

and early modern periods that blurs the distinction between them.⁷ Though it seems the continuity perspective has gained prominence since the middle of the 20th century, few have accounted for this adequately. Indeed, the surviving evidence suggests that Henry VII enhanced previously developed tactics and learned from the mistakes made by his immediate predecessors who had ruled England during the Wars of the Roses.

While York rule was brief (1461-70, 1471-85), there are comparisons and contrasts to be made between it and that of the first Tudor monarch, but first it may be prudent to define the term New Monarchy. This will provide a context in which to think about distinguishing between practices that seemingly maintain the political traditions of Henry VII's predecessors and those which become characteristic of European monarchs in the early modern period. The goal therein is to determine what practices transfer over and evaluate their implications for the monarch's ability to innovate methods of self-rule. The New Monarchy is a phenomenon that can be defined as a shift to absolutist rule that became characteristic of many European monarchs of the early modern period. Some historians have modified the definition to recapture J. R. Green's assertion that these rulers were absolutists, but not despots.⁸ Perhaps the late medieval historian M.A. Hicks put it best describing it as "a combination of ideology, procedures and coercive implementation."⁹ In other words, new monarchs like Edward IV and Henry VII pursued authoritative policy goals, and, if at all, were more concerned with maintaining an appearance of parliamentary consent than obtaining it. In fact, even Elton argued that Henry VII sought to bring "potentially dangerous" men to heel rather than to bolster the treasury.¹⁰ These practices illustrative of new monarchs serve as an archetype for the York and Tudor rulers considered in this comparative study.

The short nature of Richard III's reign (1483 – 85) has precluded him from substantive discussion in this work. Thus, the focus of this article will be on Edward IV and Henry VII. The areas considered are those in which York and Tudor policies overlapped: the nobility, financial reform, and foreign trade. More specifically, York and Tudor monarchs alike sought, as much as possible, to increase their control over the English nobility, produce more efficient standards of collecting revenue independent of Parliament, and strategically position England within the emerging wool trade industry. Many of the policies which allowed these monarchs to centralize power under the Crown were economic in nature. Although many of them originated during Edward IV's reign, Henry VII typically provided more effective implementation.

The instability of Henry VI's reign is regarded as quite the juxtaposition to that of his successors in terms of asserting any degree of control over the aristocracy. Yet, it was clear that if the new monarchs wanted to rule independent of Parliament, then they would need means for

⁷ John L. Watts, ed., *The End of the Middle Ages? England in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Stroud, U.K.: Sutton, 1998).

⁸ Paul Cavill, *The English Parliaments of Henry VII 1485-1504* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

⁹ Michael Hicks, *Edward IV* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 151.

¹⁰ Geoffrey R. Elton, *Reform and Reformation: England, 1509-1558* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), 7.

generating revenue that lay within the royal prerogative.¹¹ That being said, Edward IV was hardly averse to the nobility; on the contrary, overdependence upon baronial powers characterized the tumultuous first nine years of his reign.¹² To undo this reputation, Edward IV sought to create a formal patronage network that would expand Yorkist dominance. Indeed, the *Croyland Chronicles* record that Edward “had taken care to distribute the most trustworthy of his servants throughout all parts of the kingdom.”¹³

Typically, appointments secured through royal patronage were for life, but Edward IV knew well that loyalties in this period were fleeting. As a result, many of the grants he bestowed had forfeitures attached and as such they could be revoked. All grants were subject to a series of Acts of Resumption. Both kings rather meticulously reviewed and initialed the provisos that patentees were required to submit to obtain exemptions for each individual act, and those seeking to pass lands to heirs were often revoked.¹⁴ The direct attention of the monarch in this matter emphasizes the concerns these rulers had for assessing the state of their respective systems of patronage to maintain a control that must have seemed foreign given the volatility of the past century. Lander has argued that Henry VII continued the practice, most notably to undo grants made by Richard III, but argues that the bulk of acquiesced crown lands were gathered while Edward IV still reigned.¹⁵

There is little doubt regarding Lander’s assertion that Henry VII inherited vast properties as a product of the forfeiture clauses attached to grants, but the use of those lands differs from York to Tudor. Henry VII owed fewer favors than his York predecessor which enabled him to keep the lands rather than reward them to loyal subjects.¹⁶ However, the first Tudor monarch anticipated that he would need to secure loyalties through other means. As Edward IV sought to do with forfeitures, Henry VII employed methods that rewarded his loyal subjects in a way that made them more dependent and/or no more well-off financially than they had been previously. One prevalent method he deployed was a system of bonds and recognizances. These were debts that could be triggered if the conditions attached were not met.¹⁷ While this practice originated under Henry VI, and was maintained by Edward IV, Henry VII began to use it as a primary means of coercing the nobility.

¹¹ Gerald Harriss, “Political Society and the Growth of Government in Late Medieval England” *Past & Present* 138 (February 1993): 28-57 at 44.

¹² Michael Hicks, *The Wars of the Roses, 1455-1485* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 23.

¹³ Anonymous, “The Croyland Chronicle: The Third Continuation of the History of Croyland Abbey (January, 1477 – June, 1483),” *Richard III Society*, <http://www.r3.org/on-line-library-text-essays/crowland-chronicle/part-vii/> (accessed December 1, 2017).

¹⁴ Hicks, *The Wars of the Roses, 1455-1485*, 201.

¹⁵ J. R. Lander, *Government and Community: England, 1450-1509* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 69.

¹⁶ Anthony Tuck, *Crown and Nobility, 1272-1461: Political Conflict in Late Medieval England* (Worcester: Barnes & Noble Books, 1985), 324.

¹⁷ Hicks, *The Wars of the Roses, 1455-1485*, 256.

There are other instances where the goal of limiting the power of the nobility remains clear during both the York and Tudor reigns even though different policies were employed to achieve this important goal. For example, whereas Edward IV significantly promoted the nobility, the total number of noble families diminished substantially under Henry VII. However, both had the intent of maintaining the loyalty of their aristocratic subjects in mind. For Edward IV, it was necessary to establish a network of nobles to expand Yorkist influence, but also to award those who helped to secure the throne. His arguably excessive patronage for his wife's family, the Woodvilles, put him at odds with many of his supporters and is seen as one of the causes of Warwick's rebellion. Edward IV used the marriages of the queen's sisters to expand his household loyalties, but managed to anger some of his staunchest supporters, though some contend this did not directly result in Warwick's rebellion in 1469.¹⁸

Regardless of whether these decisions truly did contribute to the instability that briefly ended Edward's reign, Henry Tudor intended to make no such error. First, Henry VII sought to grant as few land appointments as possible, instead opting to reward loyalty with appointments to the Order of the Garter, which came with no hereditary titles or land holdings.¹⁹ Second, his marriage to Elizabeth York was uncontroversial, unlike Edward IV's marriage to her mother, Elizabeth Woodville. In doing so, Henry VII combined the Lancaster and York claims strengthening his own in the process.²⁰ In corresponding fashion, under Henry's reign the number of noble families was cut in half by 1509, and relatively few nobles had enough power to influence him in any way, let alone to the extent by which Edward had been swayed by Warwick prior to 1470.²¹

Philip Edwards indicates that many of these noble families died out for reasons directly unrelated to Henry VII, namely the lack of an heir. Yet, this does not detract from the fact that this is one of the primary reasons Henry VII is seen as more successful in consolidating authority over the nobility than his Yorkish predecessors. However, this should not be construed as an attempt to perpetuate the myth that Henry VII remade the nobility upon his accession, but rather insinuates that a mixture of circumstances resulted in a depleted noble class in comparison to Henry's York predecessors.²²

A method similar (but riskier) to resumption in nature, but also in terms of establishing fealty from the nobility was the use of Acts of Attainder. These statutes allowed those suspected of treason, or other high crimes, to be convicted by an Act of Parliament, and have their lands stripped and assimilated into the Crown's holdings.²³ In April 1470, Edward IV used Acts of

¹⁸ Susan Higginbottom, *The Woodvilles: The Wars of the Roses and England's Most Infamous Family* (Gloucestershire, U.K.: The History Press, 2013), 34.

¹⁹ Roger Lockyer, *Tudor and Stuart Britain, 1485-1714* (Abingdon, U.K.: Taylor and Francis, 2004), 5.

²⁰ Francis Bacon, *The History of the Reign of King Henry VII and Selected Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 7.

²¹ Philip Edwards, *The Making of the English State, 1460-1660* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 87.

²² E. A. Wasson, "The Penetration of New Wealth into the English Governing Class from the Middle Ages to the First World War," *The Economic History Review* 51 (1998), 25-48 at 35.

²³ Lockyer, *Tudor and Stuart Britain, 1485-1714*, 5.

Attainder against those who had supported the earl of Warwick's rebellion after the Kingmaker grew discontented with Edward's arbitrary decision-making.²⁴ Though Warwick's rebellion briefly unseated Edward IV only a decade into his rule, when he returned to the throne less than a year later and acquired Warwick's estate, he had inherited three of the largest estates in England.²⁵

While the practice of attainder itself was not novel, Henry VII began using it in a way that was almost explicitly coercive. He proliferated the practice as he prosecuted around 140 attainers. These lands were often given to courtiers who acted as tenants, and the king collected sizable fees from the taxes associated with the land holding.²⁶ This is yet another example of the ways Henry used informal patronage to avoid granting titles. In most cases, attainers against supporters were reversed, and their lands were restored.²⁷ For example, Nicholas Latimer, who had been a supporter of the duke of Buckingham when he revolted against Richard III, was attainted in 1484, but pardoned and put on the bench of Dorset after Henry VII was victorious at Bosworth.²⁸ In fact, roughly 65% of the attainers executed between 1453 and 1504 were reversed, and as a result the financial effect of attainers was temporary at best.²⁹ By using attainers to apply pressure, Henry VII avoided giving away Crown lands and actually expanded his holdings. Yet, it appears Henry was aware that authoritarian behavior had shortened the reigns of his predecessors, so the reversal of attainers was typically accompanied by new positions, though these new titles often came with no land.

In large part, the power centralization that took place from York to Tudor England focuses on increasing royal income. It should then come as little surprise that overlap can mostly be identified through financial policy. Growing disdain for parliamentary taxation since the end of the 14th century would have been apparent by the time Edward IV came to power in 1461. He showcases his awareness of this sensitive issue when he told Parliament he sought "not to charge my subjects but in great and urgent causes."³⁰ Thus, he would have to find methods of obtaining solvency that did not require him to rely on Parliament.

Edward IV pursued a variety of economic policies that make him stand out from his Lancastrian forbearers. Reclaimed lands were put into the hands of salaried officials, rather than

²⁴ "Calendar of the Patent Rolls" (1461-1485), *Hathi Trust Digital Library*, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=iau.31858020272120;view=1up;seq=230> (accessed December 1, 2017).

²⁵ George Holmes, *The Later Middle Age, 1272-1485*, ed. Christopher Brooke and Denis Mack Smith (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1966), 234.

²⁶ Steven Gunn, "The Courtiers of Henry VII," *The English Historical Review* 108 (1993): 23-49 at 45.

²⁷ Hicks, *The Wars of the Roses, 1455-1485*, 256.

²⁸ D. A. Lockett, "Crown Patronage and Political Morality in Early Tudor England: The Case of Giles, Lord Daubeney," *The English Historical Review* 110, no. 437 (1995): 578-95 at 584.

²⁹ J. R. Lander, *Conflict and Stability in Fifteenth-Century England*, 3rd ed. (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1969), 103.

³⁰ Edward IV, "Edward IV's Speech to Parliament, 1467," in *Lancastrians and Yorkists: The Wars of the Roses*, ed. D. R. Cook (New York: Routledge, 2014), 98-99.

sold off for enormous rents.³¹ This allowed the king to insert loyal men who acted as ad hoc landlords with the purpose of finding any justification they could to hike up the rent.³² While this may have increased revenue, it was the establishment of the King's Chamber over the Exchequer as the national treasury that set the tone for true reform in Edward's financial administration. In the process, Edward IV not only avoided the audits of his creditors, but placed the royal coffers firmly at his disposal. He employed a plethora of auditors and surveyors, and even siphoned money from the Exchequer into the King's Chamber.³³ As Edward IV had diligently attended to the forfeiture provisos, Henry VII was vigilant in his administration of Chamber finance. Virtually all chamber accounts were scrutinized and signed by the king, and he established commissions to address feudal income that many may have attempted to hide. An Act of Parliament passed in January 1504 set coinage standards so as not to allow the debasement of the currency.³⁴

Much is made of Edward IV's use of benevolences, which were actively employed by Henry VII as well. This was a system of forced loans which predates both reigns but was revived by Edward IV. Edward's 1474 benevolence was lucrative, but widely unpopular, and benevolences were ultimately criminalized under Richard III.³⁵ The practice was revived by Henry VII, but it appears Henry was more careful to limit the extraction of these payments to those who could afford it, and unlike Edward IV, he paid all of them back.³⁶ This may have contributed to its overwhelming unpopularity in the York era, as opposed to the reception Henry VII received. However, it is more likely the case that Henry VII's securing of parliamentary assent deterred civil unrest; this is a step that Edward had not taken.³⁷ Henry VII often improved upon practices and mistakes introduced (or reintroduced) under York rule.

Another aspect of royal finance that intersects in York and Tudor rule is their engagement in trade. As England slowly recovered from the financial collapse of the mid-14th century, and the burgeoning cloth trade began recovery, by the second half of Edward IV's reign he was encouraging nobles to engage in trade just as much as the gentry.³⁸ It is likely that in this respect he was influenced by the royal council, which had among its members both the landed aristocracy and gentry/professional classes.³⁹ In the second half of Edward IV's reign Customs duties, which had existed since the late 13th century, substantially increased their yield. However,

³¹ Anthony Cheetham, *A Royal History of England: The Wars of the Roses*, ed. Antonia Frasier (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 72.

³² Hicks, *Edward IV*, 156.

³³ B. P. Wolffe, "The Management of English Royal Estates under the Yorkist Kings," *The English Historical Review* 71 (1956): 1-27 at 14.

³⁴ Bryan Beacon, *Henry VII: The First Tudor King* (London: The Rubicon Press, 2000), 110.

³⁵ Roger Virgoe, "The Benevolence of 1481," *The English Historical Review* 104 (1989): 25-45 at 26.

³⁶ Beacon, *Henry VII: The First Tudor King*, 111.

³⁷ Bacon, *The History of the Reign of King Henry VII and Selected Works*, 85.

³⁸ Pamela Nightingale, "Knights and Merchants: Trade, Politics and the Gentry in Late Medieval England," *Past & Present* 169 (2000) 36-62, at 62.

³⁹ Robert Bucholz and Newton Key, *Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 39.

there is debate about whether this was a product of trade expansion or efficient administration.⁴⁰ Both kings commissioned goods: Edward with wool and tin, and Henry with cloth.⁴¹

Surprisingly, in 1493 Henry VII made the unfortunate decision of banning Burgundian imports, which resulted in a serious economic slump that led to riots in London.⁴² However, protectionism was hardly a new development during Henry VII's reign. Edward banned the export of unfulled cloth, and both Henry VII and Henry VIII would later renew this policy in 1487 and 1512 respectively.⁴³ Accordingly, the standard of living began to increase dramatically under the Tudors. By 1577, it was "not rare to see an abundance of Arras, rich hangings of tapestry."⁴⁴ As Bennet acknowledges, this would not have been the case merely a century before.

In hindsight, economic policy was too broad a concept from which to draw any specific conclusions without a longer discussion being necessary. However, reflecting on the overlaps presented above, Edward IV can be seen as a man with one foot in the doorway to modernity and one foot out. He saw that he would need to be innovative to keep his throne, and more should be said about his contributions to early modern developments. Conversely, Henry VII appears to have adjusted his trajectory through the benefit of hindsight that had not been available to Edward IV during the early years of his reign. However, Henry's lapse in judgement concerning trade with Burgundy reinforces the idea that though he strongly heeded his predecessor's failures, the novelty of overseas trade was a frontier about which he had little history to draw upon. Furthermore, for all the work Edward IV put into nationalizing the Chamber, he was nearly insolvent by the time of his death in 1483. His policies, while usually well-intentioned, often fell short of their mandated purposes; and some of his contemporaries, like Dominic Mancini, attribute his shortcomings to increasingly gluttonous behavior, but also allude to the factional disputes within his Yorkist alliance.⁴⁵ Ultimately, Henry VII's reign was arguably less innovative, albeit far more efficient than those of his predecessors.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Lander, *Government and Community: England, 1450-1509*, 79.

⁴¹ Lockyer, *Tudor and Stuart Britain: 1485-1714*, 22.

⁴² Hicks, *The Wars of the Roses, 1455-1485*, 150.

⁴³ John D. Mackie, *The Earlier Tudors, 1485-1558*, ed. Sir George Clark (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), 469.

⁴⁴ Harrison Paston, *The Pastons and Their England*, ed. and trans. H.S. Bennet (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 87-88 at 87.

⁴⁵ Lander, *Government and Community: England, 1450-1509*, 312.

⁴⁶ Neville Williams, *A Royal History of England: The Tudors*, ed. Antonia Frasier (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 28.

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Johnson

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