

THE ROAD TO RULERSHIP – HENRY TUDOR, KING OF ENGLAND

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Francis Bacon's *The History of the Reign of King Henry the Seventh* (1622) is thematically organised in five major parts that, according to the author, correspond to the five most important moments in the protagonist's reign: 1 – the Victory in Bosworth and the Arrival in London; 2 – the Coronation; 3 – the Marriage to Elizabeth of York; 4 – the Lambert Simnell Affair; 5 – the Perkin Warbeck Affair. Due to the king's peculiar situation, that I will briefly approach, all parts seem to be particularly related because one of the author's purposes seems to be precisely the emphasis on that peculiar condition.

In an almost abrupt way, *Francis* Bacon opens the text with a reference to a crucial death that symbolised one of the most decisive moments in the history of England:

AFTER that Richard, the third of that name, ... was by the Divine Revenge, favouring the design of an exiled man, overthrown and slain at Bosworth Field; there succeeded in the kingdom the Earl of Richmond, thenceforth styled Henry the Seventh. (Bacon 1861: 27)

The death of the last Plantagenet king on the 22nd of August 1485 put an end to a

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long, disruptive age but, above all, proved to be exceptionally emblematic in Henry Tudor's road to power, once it meant the annihilation of a ruling house and the consequent beginning of a new dynasty that would span an era of deep changes.

Henry Tudor's ascending the throne and his 24-year reign were, however, characterised by problematic circumstances that are thoroughly stressed by Bacon. First of all, fundamental principles, such as the royal investiture, the divine right of kings, the primogeniture and the essence of the royal entity, rooted in centuries of tradition, were suddenly undermined when the winner of Bosworth was crowned king of England. In fact, the situation of this exiled, obscure earl, whose claims were weak and controversial, was not consonant with the notion of the sovereign's *gemina persona*, who never dies and whose partition is impossible – the Body Politic, or the mystic entity invested by God; the Body Natural, or the human, legitimate heir to a dynastic house. The notion of the King's Two Bodies, as defined by Henry of Bracton, Marsiglio of Padua, William of Ockham, John of Salisbury and, more recently, by John Neville Figgis and Ernst Kantorowicz, could no longer prevail, at least according to the same paradigm, once the first Tudor had not been fully or truly invested, as he was not the uncontroversial legitimate heir to a dynasty. Furthermore, with Richard III's death and Henry VII's accession, the concept of demise, so powerfully conveyed by the solemn proclamation "*The King is dead! Long live the King!*" loses its *raison d'être*. Even during the most difficult times of the Wars of the Roses, when the throne was being alternately occupied by York and Lancaster heirs, this notion of power transfer in both acceptations did never die out. With the first Tudor, however, the notion of continuity, as well as of inseparability of the Two Bodies, was eventually broken when it became impossible for the essence of kingship to pass to the

Body Natural of a direct heir.

Bacon approaches all these relevant issues with efficient subtlety and insists on the precariousness of Henry VII's legitimacy. According to the author, the king faced a difficult and substantial dilemma, "*the inconveniencies appearing unto him on all parts*" (Bacon, 1861: 30), when he sought to achieve a solid position by claiming three different rights that only indirectly could be considered his own:

The first, the title of the Lady Elizabeth with whom, by precedent pact with the party that brought him in, he was to marry. The second the ancient and long disputed title (both by plea and arms) of the house of Lancaster ... The third, the title of the sword or conquest, for that he came in by victory of battle, and that the king in possession was slain in the field. (Bacon, 1861:29)

By marrying Elizabeth of York and by imprisoning her cousin Edward of Warwick for life, Henry VII tried to take control of the York right, undoubtedly the strongest and most consistent claim, once the Lancaster one had been attained by Parliament. The York spectre would however remain a continuous threat, having been materialised in a very peculiar way, as we shall see, in part because of the still unsolved mystery surrounding the disappearance of Edward IV's sons.

The dilemma assumes the form of a debate built upon an elaborate process of *argumentatio* that may represent Tudor's hypothetical conflict when analysing his odd situation and the difficulties in seizing those titles. At the same time, as it happens in many other passages, as well as in the Renaissance biographical texts, the author's presence in his work is very strong. The process of *argumentatio* reveals Bacon's own

opinion on the matter when he states that the York's title is "*The ... fairest, and most likely to give contentment to the people*" (Bacon, 1861: 29) and when, summarising the whole dilemma, he states that "[Henry] *knew there was a very great difference between a King that holdeth his crown by a civil act of estates, and one that holdeth it originally by the law of nature and descent of blood*" (Bacon, 1861 :29-30).

In reality, Henry Tudor had become a king *de facto*, not *de jure*, and shed a new light upon the recurrent problem of usurpation/deposition, as well as upon the sovereign's right. His situation was so dubious that only ten years after Bosworth, with the '*De facto Act*' of 1495, was a solution devised, changing the concept of kingship for ever: there is only one king in the kingdom who is king and sovereign "*for the time being*". This acquires a highly meaningful dimension when considering the Lambert Simnell / Perkin Warbeck Affairs which, having been a subtle materialisation of the York menace, constituted the most difficult problems Henry VII had to face. Moreover, during the Tudor dynasty the meaning of the Act would be reinforced by the thesis that kings are heirs to the kingdom, not heirs to kings. Bacon considers '*De Facto Act*' "*of a strange nature, rather just than legal, and more magnanimous than provident*" (Bacon, 1861: 159), which puts into evidence the expression "*the king for the time being*" (Bacon, 1861: 159) coined by Henry VII. Thus the Act filled the gap of an ancestral dynastic lineage. It not only solved the serious problem raised by Richmond's accession regarding the concept that the king never dies, but it also sought to ensure other fundamental aspects concerning the specificity of the kingdom, that Bacon does not fail to refer:

This law did ordain, That no person that did assist in arms or otherwise the King for the time being, should after be impeached therefore, or attainted either

by the course of law or by act of Parliament ...(Bacon, 1861:159)

Another relevant aspect intimately related to Henry Tudor's background and to the peculiarities of his accession is the lack of a prince's education. The Earl of Richmond had not been prepared to rule, once his place in the succession line was peculiarly remote, extremely indirect and highly questionable, as we have seen. According to Bacon, despite his long reign and everything he achieved in terms of government, administration and stability, the king faced "*a thread of many seditions and troubles*" (Bacon 1861: 31) that subsisted for a long time, in part because of his lack of sagacity and preparation, in part because of the stigma involving his accession:

The King was green in his estate; and contrary to his own opinion ..., was not without much hatred throughout the realm. (Bacon, 1861: 44)

Bacon seems to justify Henry VII's hazards through these two relevant factors, even implying that they were like a curse casting its shadow on the new era and the new dynasty. The fact that the Simnell Affair began in the second year of the reign and the Warbeck Affair in the eighth constitutes strong evidence that the king's lack of sagacity persisted and the learning process was indeed long and sinuous. On the other hand, the two complex events may be a metonymy of the situations of subversion, rebellion and treason, resulting from the dubious circumstances mentioned so far.

The impending menaces are emphasised by the repetition of turbulence elements that constitute synecdoches of the king's innumerable torments ("*storms*", "*tides*", "*winds*", "*rains*", "*weeds*"), whereas the insistence on verbs such as "*look*", "*see*",

“foresee”, “watch”, “spy” may be seen as a metaphor of their opposites, i.e. of Henry VII’s lack of vision and of prevision. Concomitantly, the power of performance and the consequent power of illusion proved to be fundamental to the success of the deceits: the brilliant disguises fooled the eyes, the masterful speeches fooled the ears. In reality, the Lambert Simnell / Perkin Warbeck Affairs correspond to two cases of personification by two protagonists who embody Henry Tudor’s deepest fear – the York claim – and who represent the instability of the new times that Bacon considers imminently explosive, led by a non-conciliatory king, “*green in his estate*”:

Neither was the King’s nature and customs greatly fit to disperse these mists; but contrariwise he had a fashion rather to create doubts than assurance. Thus was fuel prepared for the spark: the spark, that afterwards kindled such a fire and combustion ...(Bacon, 1861: 44-45)

The repetition of the key-word “*idol*”, whose deep meaning may be traced within the context of Bacon’s whole work, is extremely important to a thorough understanding of the complexity of the accidents. In *The Advancement of Learning, Book V* the author states that the human mind is “*like an enchanted glass, full of superstitions and imposture*” (Bacon, 1860: 435), susceptible to failure when apprehending outer elements. The idols or illusions are the most dangerous fallacies because of their own nature and of the characteristics of the human mind:

... idols are imposed upon the mind, either by the nature of man in general; or by the individual nature of each man; or by words, or nature communicative.

(Bacon, 1860: 431)

The illusions embodied by Simnell and Warbeck proved to be highly pernicious because of the effectiveness of the deceits and the range of their influence: they lasted a long time, interfering in vital areas that involved the king, the kingdom and the people, and they thrived especially because of the power of words. In the text, they are developed upon a relevant dramatic lexicon, interwoven with a set of elements pertaining to the domain of magic, superstition and idolatry. There is a permanent insistence on words like “*disguised*”, “*pretended*”, “*counterfeit*”, “*personate*”, “*frame*”, “*instruct*” and “*play*”, whereas the impostors are frequently referred to as “*idols*”, “*image[s] of wax*”, “*airy bod[ies] or phantasm[s]*”, even manipulated by the art of sorcery. The similarities between the two “*strange accident[s] of state*”, as Bacon calls them, are obvious: both young men take advantage of their physical resemblance to two royal Plantagenet princes – Edward of Warwick and Richard of York, Clarence’s and Edward IV’s sons, respectively – and are taught to assume their identities; both succeed in personifying them by means of remarkable plans, ingenious devices and excellent dramatic performances; both “*strange accidents of state*” constitute evidence of the strong power of factions, and both draw attention to the king’s weak claim – Simnell goes as far as to be crowned king in Dublin as Edward VI; Warbeck is recognised the true heir by James IV of Scotland, the Emperor Maximilian and Charles VIII of France.

Each case has naturally its own specificities and characteristics. For instance, the Warbeck Affair takes longer and its consequences are more serious, in part because of the protagonist’s more brilliant performance and greater autonomy. But it is precisely the set of similarities between the two accidents that does emphasise the core of the whole

problem, powerfully depicted in Warbeck's speech before the King of Scotland. This moment constitutes the climax of his performance and of both accidents, taken as a whole. At the height of his persuasive rhetoric strategies and personification – "*For I myself that stand here in your presence, am that very Richard Duke of York*" (Bacon, 1861: 164) – he imputes to the King of England the murder of the Plantagenet heir, acidly and definitely demolishing his right to the throne:

*... one Henry Tidder ... by subtile and foul means ... obtain[ed] the crown [...]
This Henry, my mortal enemy, so soon as he had knowledge of my being alive,
imagined and wrought all the subtile ways and means he could to procure my
final destruction. For my mortal enemy [...] hath offered large sums of money
to corrupt the Princes ... and made importune labours to certain servants about
my person to murder or poison me ... (Bacon, 1861:164-165)*

Henry VII succeeded in eventually exposing the impostors and solidifying his and his descendants' rights. The so-called Tudor myth may then be seen as strategically indispensable to fulfil vital blanks and to dispel essential subsisting doubts which the Simnell / Warbeck Affairs so powerfully underlined. The way the history of the reign is told by Bacon, especially these "*strange accidents of state*", show that innumerable serious matters were indeed at stake. Therefore, the literal road that led Richmond from exile in France to victory on Bosworth Field, and from there to rulership on the throne of England corresponded to a metaphorical path that prefigured the sinuous, deep process of learning undertaken along many years, as well as the effort to justify the accession. In such an adverse context, the dynamism that Bacon imparts to his report, among all the

disruptive elements, results ultimately positive, once it may indicate that the process of learning was effective and that the king “*for the time being*”, no longer “*green in his estate*” after the two difficult tests, managed to consolidate his power based on new principles, themselves signs of other deep changes in the coming new era:

[Warbeck's] *was one of the longest plays of that kind that hath been in memory, and might perhaps have had another end, if he had not met with a King both wise, stout, and fortunate.* (Bacon, 1861: 203/22-25)

WORKS CITED

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