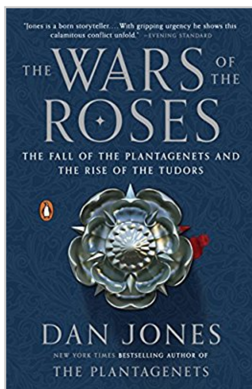

The Wars of the Roses: The Fall of the Plantagenets and the Rise of the Tudors

By Dan Jones

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Some of the greatest heroes and villains of history were thrown together in these turbulent times, from Joan of Arc to Henry V, whose victory at Agincourt marked the high point of the medieval monarchy, and Richard III, who murdered his own nephews in a desperate bid to secure his stolen crown. This was a period when headstrong queens and consorts seized power and bent men to their will. With vivid descriptions of the battles of Towton and Bosworth, where the last Plantagenet king was slain, this dramatic narrative history revels in bedlam and intrigue. It also offers a long-overdue corrective to Tudor propaganda, dismantling their self-serving account of what they called the Wars of the Roses.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for *The Wars of the Roses*

"Exhilarating, epic, blood-and-roses history. There are battles fought in snowstorms, beheadings, jousts, clandestine marriages, spurious genealogies, flashes of chivalry and streaks of pure malevolence. . . .Jones's material is thrilling, but it is quite a task to sift, select, structure, and contextualize the information. There is fine scholarly intuition on display here and a mastery of the grand narrative; it is a supremely skillful piece of storytelling."
—The Sunday Telegraph

"Jones's greatest skill as a historical writer is to somehow render sprawling, messy epochs such as this one into manageable, easily digestible matter; he is keenly tuned to what should be served up and what should be omitted. And he still finds rooms for the telling anecdote and vivid descriptive passage. It makes for an engrossing read and a thoroughly enjoyable introduction to the Lancastrian-Yorkist struggle."
—The Spectator

"If you're a fan of *Game of Thrones* or *The Tudors* then Dan Jones' swashbucklingly entertaining slice of medieval history will be right up your alley… Every bit as entertaining and readable as his previous blockbuster *The Plantagenets*."
– Daily Express

"Jones is a born storyteller, peopling the terrifying uncertainties of each moment with a superbly drawn cast of characters and powerfully evoking the brutal realities of civil war. With gripping urgency, he shows this calamitous conflict unfold."
—The Evening Standard

"Jones tells a good story. That is a good thing, since storytelling has gone out of favor among so many historians. . . He admits that the era is at times incomprehensible, yet he manages to impose upon it sufficient order to render this book both edifying and utterly entertaining. His delightful wit is as ferocious as the dreadful violence he describes."
***—The Times* (London)**

"A fine new history . . . Tautly structured, elegantly written, and finely attuned to the values and sensibilities of the age, *The Wars of the Roses* is probably the best introduction to the conflict currently in print."
—The Mail on Sunday

"It's not often that a book manages to be both scholarly and a page-turner, but Jones succeeds on both counts in this entertaining follow-up to his bestselling *The Plantagenets*. . . He sets a new high-water mark in the current revisionism of the Tudor era."
***—Publishers Weekly* (starred review)**

"Jones authoritatively sets the scene for the 15th-century succession crises . . . valiantly pared down for fluid readability."

—Kirkus Reviews

About the Author

Dan Jones is the author of *The Plantagenets: The Warrior Kings and Queen Who Made England*, a #1 international bestseller and *New York Times bestseller*, and *Wars of the Roses,* which charts the story of the fall of the Plantagenet dynasty and improbable rise of the Tudors. He writes and presents the popular Netflix series "Secrets of Great British Castles" and appeared alongside George R.R. Martin in the DVD for Game of Thrones to discuss its historical antecedents. He is also the author of *Magna Carta: The Birth of Liberty* and *Summer of Blood: England's First Revolution* and is working on a history of the Knights Templar due out in September 2017.

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Note on Names, Money, and Distances

THE NAMES OF PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS in this book have generally been modernized for the sake of familiarity and consistency. Thus Nevill becomes Neville, Wydeville becomes Woodville, Tudur becomes Tudor, and so on. Latin, French and archaic English sources have all been translated or rendered into modern English except in a very few cases where original spellings have been maintained to illustrate a historical point.

Where particularly pertinent, sums of money have been translated into modern currencies with the assistance of the conversion tool at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency, which gives modern values for ancient, and also has a "purchasing power" function. Readers should be aware, however, that the conversion of monetary values across the centuries is a perilously inexact science, and that the figures given are for rough guidance only. As a very rough guide, £100 in 1450 would be worth £55,000 (or $90,000) today. The same sum would represent ten years' annual salary for an ordinary English laborer in the mid-fifteenth century.

Where a distance between two places is given, it has usually been calculated using Google Maps Walking Directions, and thus tends to be calculated according to the fastest route via modern roads.

Introduction

AT SEVEN O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING on Friday, May 27, 1541, within the precincts of the Tower of London, an old woman walked out into the light of a spring day. Her name was Margaret Pole. By birth, blood and lineage she was one of the noblest women in England. Her father, George, duke of Clarence, had been the brother to a king, and her mother, Isabel Neville, had in her time been coheir to one of the greatest earldoms in the land. Both parents were now long gone, memories from another age and another century.

Margaret's life had been long and exciting. For twenty-five years she had been the countess of Salisbury, one of only two women of her time to have held a peerage in her own right. She had until recently been one of the five wealthiest aristocrats of her generation, with lands in seventeen different counties. Now, at sixty-seven—ancient by Tudor standards—she appeared so advanced in age that intelligent observers took her to be eighty or ninety.1

Like many inhabitants of the Tower of London, Margaret Pole was a prisoner. Two years previously she had been stripped of her lands and titles by an act of parliament which accused her of having "committed and perpetrated diverse and sundry other detestable and abominable treasons" against her cousin, King Henry

VIII. What these treasons were was never fully evinced, because in truth Margaret's offenses against the crown were more general than particular. Her two principal crimes were her close relation to the king and her suspicion of his adoption of the new forms and doctrines of Christian belief that had swept through Europe during the past two decades. For these two facts, the one of birthright and the second of conscience, she had lived within London's stout, supposedly impervious riverside fortress, which bristled with cannons from its whitewashed central tower, for the past eighteen months.

Margaret had lived well in jail. Prison for a sixteenth-century aristocrat was supposed to be a life of restricted movement tempered by decent, even luxurious conditions, and she had been keen to ensure that her confinement met the highest standard. She expected to serve a comfortable sentence, and when she found the standards wanting, she complained.2 Before she was moved to London she spent a year locked in Cowdray House in West Sussex, under the watch of the unenthusiastic William Fitzwilliam, earl of Southampton. The earl and his wife had found her spirited and indignant approach to incarceration rather tiresome and had been glad when she was moved on.

In the Tower, Margaret was able to write letters to her relatives and was provided with servants and good, expensive food. Her nobility was not demeaned. Earlier in the year Queen Catherine's tailor had been appointed to make her a set of new clothes, and just a few weeks previously another order of garments had turned up, ordered and paid for directly by the king. Henry had also sent her a nightgown lined with fur and another with Cypriot satin, petticoats, bonnets and hose, four pairs of shoes and a new pair of slippers. More than £15—roughly the equivalent of two years' wages for a common laborer at the time—had been spent on her clothing in just six months. As she walked out into the cool morning air, Margaret Pole could therefore have reflected that, although she was due to be beheaded that morning, she would at least die wearing new shoes.

Her execution had been arranged in a hurry. She had been informed only hours previously that her nephew the king had ordered her death: a shockingly short time for an old lady to prepare her spirit and body for the end. According to a report that reached Eustace Chapuys, the exceptionally well-informed Imperial ambassador to England, the countess "found the thing very strange," since she had no idea "of what crime she was accused, nor how she had been sentenced." Few, in truth, would ever quite understand what threat this feeble old lady could have posed to a king as powerful and self-important as Henry VIII.

A thin crowd had gathered to bear witness. They stood by a pathetically small chopping block, erected so hastily that it was simply set on the ground and not, as was customary, raised up on a scaffold. According to Chapuys, when Margaret arrived before the block she commended her soul to her creator and asked those present to pray for King Henry and Queen Catherine, the king's three-year-old son, Prince Edward, and the twenty-five-year-old Princess Mary, her goddaughter. But as the old woman stood talking to the sparse crowd (Chapuys put the number at 150; the French ambassador, Charles de Marillac, suggested it was fewer), a feeling of restlessness went around. She was told to hurry up and place her neck on the little piece of wood.

The Tower's regular executioner was not on duty that morning. He was in the north, alongside King Henry, who had visited the farthest reach of his kingdom to dampen the threat of rebellion against his rule. The Tower's ax had therefore been entrusted to a deputy: a man of tender years and little experience in the difficult art of decapitation. (Chapuys described him as a "wretched and blundering youth.") He was faced with a task wildly inappropriate to his years. Only one other noblewoman had been executed in England since the Norman Conquest: the king's second wife, Anne Boleyn. She had been beheaded in a single stroke with a sword by a specially imported French executioner. *This* was not *that*, and the hapless executioner knew it. When the signal was given to strike, he brought the weapon down toward the block. But he botched the job. Rather than cutting cleanly through Margaret's neck in one stroke, he slammed the ax's blade into

the old woman's shoulders and head. She did not die. He brought the ax down again, and missed again. It took several more blows to dispatch her, a barbarous assault in which the inept axeman literally hacked the old woman's upper body to pieces. It was a foul and cruel butchery that would shock everyone who heard of it. "May God in his high Grace pardon her soul," wrote Chapuys, "for certainly she was a most virtuous and honourable lady."3

• • •

Margaret Pole was at one level just another casualty of the religious wars that dominated the sixteenth century, in which followers of the old faith—Roman Catholicism—and various splinter groups of the new faith—Protestantism—sought to smite one another into submission. These wars took different forms. Occasionally they were fought between kingdoms allied to opposing faiths, but far more often, the religious wars were civil and dynastic conflicts that ripped individual kingdoms asunder. This was certainly the case in England during the 1540s, and Margaret's execution in that sense represented a reforming king's deliberate strike against a powerful family who clung to the old faith.

Yet her death could also be seen as the undignified final act in a long spell of nonreligious aristocratic violence that had begun nearly a century earlier. These were wars of politics and personality that had sprung from a struggle for hegemony following the slow but catastrophic collapse of royal authority from the late 1440s onward. This conflict, usually assumed to have been closed on the accession of Henry Tudor as Henry VII in 1485 and his defense of the crown at the battle of Stoke in 1487, in fact continued to haunt sixteenth-century politics long afterward. Certainly it played a role in Margaret Pole's death, for this old woman was one of the last surviving members of the Plantagenet dynasty and a living relic of what we now call the Wars of the Roses.

Dozens of Margaret's immediate and extended family had fallen victim to these wars. Her father, George, duke of Clarence, was twenty-eight when his brother King Edward IV had him executed for treason—drowned in a butt of the sweet Greek wine known as Malmsey, in memory of which Margaret was said always to wear a tiny wine keg on her bracelet.4 Two of her paternal uncles had been killed in pitched battles in 1460 and 1485. Both of her grandfathers had also died on the battlefield; one ending his days with his head impaled on the city gates of York, a paper crown nailed to his skull. Margaret's brother Edward, styled but not officially recognized as earl of Warwick, had spent most of his twenty-four years of life imprisoned in the Tower of London. Henry VII had ordered his execution by beheading in November 1499, when rumors spread of a plot to break him out of jail. Margaret's eldest son, Henry Pole, Lord Montague, was executed in January 1539; her eldest grandson, Montague's heir, also called Henry, would also die while incarcerated in the Tower some time after 1542. The whole history of the Pole family between the 1470s and 1540s was one of brutal destruction undertaken by three different kings. And in this the Poles were far from exceptional. They were simply the last of the great aristocratic families to be persecuted to extinction in the Wars of the Roses.

That England was used to killing its most illustrious men and women did not detract from the profound shock that Margaret Pole's callous execution caused around Europe. By June 13 the news had reached Antwerp, and a week later it had spread to the Imperial Court.5 In early August the countess's second son, Reginald Pole, a renegade Catholic churchman who had risen to the rank of cardinal, wrote bitterly to Juan Álvarez de Toledo, Cardinal Archbishop of Burgos, that his mother had "perished, not by the law of nature, but by a violent death, inflicted on her by one from whom it was the last due, as he was her cousin." Reginald's only consolation in his mother's savage murder was that she had suffered a martyr's death. "To suffer as Christ, his Apostles, and so many martyrs and virgins suffered, is not ignominious," he wrote, but Pole nevertheless went on to compare Henry VIII unfavorably to the ancient tyrants Herod, Nero and Caligula. "Their cruelty is far surpassed by the iniquity of this man, who, with much less semblance of

justice, put to death a most innocent woman, who was of his own kin, of advanced age, and who had grown old with a reputation for virtue."6

To paint Henry VIII as a brute killer in a long line of otherwise virtuous kings was somewhat disingenuous. Henry was certainly capable of violence and cruelty toward members of his own family, but such were the times. Indeed, if anything could be said for Margaret's death it was that it marked the end of the bloodbath that had been continuing on and off since the 1450s. When her poor, mangled body finally dropped to the ground, there remained barely a single drop of Plantagenet royal blood in England, other than the little that flowed in the veins of Henry VIII and his three children. Nearly a century of butchery was coming to an end not by choice but by default: almost all the potential victims were now dead.

• • •

One of the earliest recorded uses of the phrase "The Wars of the Roses" came from the pen of the nineteenth-century British writer and royal tutor Maria, Lady Callcott. Her children's book *Little Arthur's History of England* was first published in 1835. In describing the violent upheaval that convulsed England in the fifteenth century, Callcott wrote, "For more than thirty years afterwards, the civil wars in England were called the wars of the Roses."7 She was right and she was wrong. The precise phrase is not recorded before the first quarter of the nineteenth century, but the idea of a country torn in half by the rival houses of Lancaster and York, represented respectively by the emblems of red and white roses, went back in some form to the fifteenth century.

Roses were a popular symbol throughout Europe during the Middle Ages, and their colors, whether deployed in politics, literature or art, were judged to have important and often opposing meanings. The fourteenth-century Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio used red and white roses in his *Decameron* to symbolize the entwined themes of love and death.8 Roses were doodled in the margins and illuminated letters in books of prayer, calendars and scientific texts.9 Aristocratic families in England had included roses in their heraldic badges since at least the reign of Henry III in the thirteenth century.10 King Edward I had sometimes displayed the golden rose as a symbol of monarchy. But in the later fifteenth century in England, red and white roses began to be associated closely with the fortunes of rival claimants to the crown.

The first royal rose was the white rose, representing the house of York—the descendants of Richard, duke of York, who asserted his right to the crown in 1460. When Richard's son Edward became King Edward IV in 1461, the white rose was one of a number of symbols he used to advertise his kingship. Indeed, as a young man Edward was known as "the rose of Rouen," and on his military victories his supporters sang "blessed be that flower!"11 In later decades, the white rose was adopted by many of those who chose to align themselves with Edward's memory, particularly if they wished to stake their claim to royal preeminence by virtue of their relationship to him.

The red rose was far less common until it was adopted and promoted vigorously by Henry VII in the 1480s. The earliest quasi-royal use of the red rose was by Henry Bolingbroke (later Henry IV), who had his pavilions decorated with the flowers during his famous trial by combat against Thomas Mowbray in 1398.12 There is some (slight) evidence that red roses were also associated with Henry IV's grandson Henry VI. But it was only after the battle of Bosworth in 1485 that red roses flourished as a royal badge, representing Henry Tudor's (Henry VII's) claim to the crown through his connection to the old dukes of Lancaster. The red rose was then used as a counterpoint to the white, puffing up the weak Tudor claims to royal legitimacy. ("To avenge the White, the Red Rose bloomed," wrote one chronicler, studiously following the party line after Bosworth.13) As king, Henry VII had his scribes, painters and librarians plaster documents with red roses—even going so far as to modify books owned by earlier kings so that their lavish illuminations included roses of his own favored hue.14

The red rose was more often invoked retrospectively, as its principal purpose was to pave the way, after 1485, for a third rose: the so-called Tudor rose, which was a combination of white and red, either superimposed, quartered or simply wound together. The Tudor rose was invented to symbolize the unity that had supposedly been brought about when Henry VII married Edward IV's daughter Elizabeth of York in 1486, entwining the two warring branches, the houses of Lancaster and York, together. The story this rose told was of politics as romance: it explained a half century of turmoil and bloodshed as the product of two divided families, who were brought to peace by a marriage that promised to commingle the feuding rivals. When Henry VII's son Henry VIII came to the throne in 1509, the court poet John Skelton, who grew up during the worst of the violence, wrote that "the Rose both White and Red/In one Rose now doth grow." The idea of "wars of the roses"—and, most important, of their resolution with the arrival of the Tudors—was thus by the early sixteenth century a commonplace. The concept took hold because it offered up a simple, powerful narrative: a tale that made the world, if not black and white, then red and white. It implicitly justified the Tudors' claim to the crown. And to writers over the centuries—including the Tudor historians Edward Hall and Raphael Holinshed, Elizabethan dramatists such as William Shakespeare, eighteenth-century thinkers such as Daniel Defoe and David Hume and nineteenth-century novelists like Walter Scott, all of whom invoked the roses in their depictions of the wars—the idea was irresistible. But was it really true?

The answer, alas, is no. Modern historians have come to understand that the Wars of the Roses were far more complex and unpredictable than is suggested by their alluring title. The middle to late decades of the fifteenth century experienced sporadic periods of extreme violence, disorder, warfare and bloodshed, an unprecedented number of usurpations of the throne, the collapse of royal authority, an upheaval in the power politics of the English nobility, murders, betrayals, plots and coups, the savage elimination of the direct descendants of the last Plantagenet patriarch, King Edward III, and the arrival of a new royal dynasty, the Tudors, whose claim to the throne by right of blood was somewhere between highly tenuous and nonexistent. It was a dangerous and uncertain period in which England's treacherous political life was driven by a cast of quite extraordinary characters, men and women alike, who sometimes resorted to unfathomable brutality and cruelty. The scale of the violence, the size and frequency of the battles that were fought, the rapidly shifting allegiances and motivations of the rivals and the peculiar nature of the problems that were faced were baffling to many contemporaries and have remained so to many historians. This is one very good reason why a simple narrative of warring families split and reunited took root in the sixteenth century and has endured so long afterward. But it is also true that this version of history was deliberately encouraged in the sixteenth century for political ends. The Tudors, particularly Henry VII, promoted the red rose/white rose myth vigorously, drawing on methods of dynastic propaganda that had been employed reaching far back to promote the dual monarchy of England and France during the Hundred Years' War. Their success is self-evident. Even today, with several generations of modern historians having put forward sophisticated explanations for the "Wars of the Roses," drawing on research into late medieval law, economics, culture and political thought, the simple Lancaster/York narrative is still the one that prevails when the fifteenth century becomes the subject of screen drama, popular fiction and discussion in the press. Victory to the Tudors, then: the very notion of the Wars of the Roses continues to reflect that dynasty's innate genius for self-mythologizing. They were masters of the art.

This book tells several overlapping stories. In the first place it seeks to draw an authentic picture of this harsh and troubled period, looking where possible past the distorting lens of the sixteenth century and of Tudor historiography and viewing the fifteenth century on its own terms. What we will find is the disastrous consequences of a near-total collapse in royal authority under the kingship of Henry VI, who began his rule as a wailing baby and ended it as a shambling simpleton, managing in between to trigger a crisis unique in its nature and unlike any of the previous constitutional moments of the late Middle Ages in England. This is a story not of vain aristocrats attempting to overthrow the throne for their own personal gain—of "bastard feudalism" gone awry and "overmighty nobles" scheming to wreck the realm (both have, at times, been

explanations put forward for the wars), but of a polity battered on every side by catastrophe and hobbled by inept leadership. It is the story of a realm that descended into civil war despite the efforts of its most powerful figures to avert disaster.

For nearly thirty years, Henry VI's hopeless rule was held together by the efforts of fine men and women. But they could only strain so hard. The second phase of our story examines the consequences of one man's decision that the best solution for this benighted realm was no longer to induce a weak king to govern his realm more competently, but to cast him aside and claim the crown for himself. The means by which Richard, duke of York, did this were not unprecedented, but they proved extremely destructive. To a crisis of authority was added a crisis of legitimacy as the "Yorkists" began to argue that the right to rule was not only a matter of competence but was carried in their blood. The second part of our story charts this stage of the conflict, and its eventual settlement under the able and energetic King Edward IV, who reestablished the authority and prestige of the crown and, by the time of his death, appeared to have brought England back to some semblance of normalcy and good governance.

The third part of our story asks a simple question: how on earth, from this point, did the Tudors end up kings and queens of England? The family spawned by the unlikely secret coupling of a widowed French princess and her Welsh servant during the late 1420s ought never to have found themselves anywhere near a crown. Yet when Edward IV died in 1483 and his brother Richard III usurped the crown and killed Edward's sons, the Tudors suddenly became extremely important. The third strand of our story tracks their struggle to establish their own royal dynasty—one that would become the most majestic and imperious dynasty that England had ever known. Only from the slaughter and chaos of the fifteenth century could such a family have emerged triumphant, and only by continuing the slaughter could they secure their position. So as well as examining the Wars of the Roses as a whole, this book drills down into the early history of the Tudors, presenting them not according to their own myth, but as the fifteenth century really found them.

Finally, this book examines the Tudors' struggles to keep the crown after 1485 and the process by which their history of the Wars of the Roses was established: how they created a popular vision of the fifteenth century so potent and memorable that it not only dominated the historical discourse of the sixteenth century, but has endured up to our own times.

That, then, is the aim. My last book, *The Plantagenets*, told the story of the establishment of England's great medieval dynasty. This book tells the story of its destruction. The two books do not quite follow chronologically from each other, but they can, I hope, be read as a pair of complementary works. Here, as before, I aim to tell the tale of an extraordinary royal family in a way that is scholarly, informative and entertaining.

As ever I must thank my literary agent, Georgina Capel, for her brilliance, patience and good cheer. I also owe a great debt of thanks to my visionary editor at Faber in the United Kingdom, Walter Donohue, and to the equally wonderful Joy de Menil at Viking in the United States. They and their teams have made this book a pleasure to write. I am grateful also to the staffs at the libraries, archives, castles and battlefields I have visited during the writing of this book—and most particularly to the staff at the London Library, British Library and National Archives, where I have spent a great deal of my time over the past few years. The book is dedicated to my wife, Jo Jones, who with my daughters Violet and Ivy has once again suffered my scribbling with love and humor.

And so to our story. In order fully to comprehend the process by which Plantagenet rule was destroyed and the Tudor dynasty established, we open not in the 1450s, when politics began to fracture into violence and warfare, nor in the 1440s, when the first signs of deep political turmoil emerged, nor even in the 1430s, when the first "English" ancestors of the Tudor monarchs were born. Rather, our story starts in 1420, when

England was the most powerful nation in western Europe, its king the flower of the world and its future apparently brighter than at any time before: a time when the idea that within a generation England would be the most troubled realm in Europe would have been little short of preposterous. As with so many tragedies, our story opens with a moment of triumph. Let us begin.

Dan Jones

Battersea, London, February 2014

I. Beginnings

1420–1437

"We were in perfect health . . ."

—King Henry VI (age seventeen months)

1

"King of all the world"

SHE WAS MARRIED in a soldier's wedding. Shortly before midday on Trinity Sunday in June 1420, a large band of musicians struck up a triumphant tune as the elegant parish church of St. Jean-au-Marché in Troyes filled with splendidly dressed lords, knights and noble ladies, gathered to observe the union of two great families who had long been set against each other. The archbishop of Sens conducted the solemn proceedings in the traditional French fashion as Catherine de Valois, youngest daughter of the mad king of France, Charles VI, and his long-suffering wife, Isabeau of Bavaria, was wedded to Henry V, king of England.

Catherine was eighteen years old. She had delicate features, a small, prim mouth and round eyes above high cheekbones. Her slender neck bent very slightly to one side, but this was a lone blemish upon the fine figure of a princess in the flush of youth. The man she was about to marry was a battle-hardened warrior. He had a drawn, clean-shaven face, pursed lips and a long nose, characteristic of the line of Plantagenet kings from whom he was descended. His dark, slightly protruding eyes bore a close resemblance to those of his father, Henry IV. His hair was cropped fashionably short to show the scars on his face, including one deep mark dating back to a battle fought when he was just sixteen, when an arrowhead lodged deep into his cheek, just to the right of his nose, and had to be cut out by a battlefield surgeon. At thirty-three, Henry V was the finest warrior among the European rulers of his day. His appearance on his wedding day was appropriately grand. "Great pomp and magnificence were displayed by him and his princes, as if he were at that moment king of all the world," wrote the high-born and well-connected French chronicler Enguerrand de Monstrelet.1

The war-torn countryside around Troyes, the ancient capital of the French county of Champagne, one hundred miles southeast of Paris, had been bristling for a fortnight with English soldiers. Henry had arrived in town on May 20, accompanied by two of his three brothers, Thomas, duke of Clarence, and John, duke of Bedford, a large number of his aristocratic war captains and some sixteen hundred other men, mostly archers. There was no room for them within the town walls, so most of Henry's regular men had been quartered in nearby villages. The king himself was staying in the western half of town at a smart hotel in the marketplace called La Couronne (The Crown). From this base he conducted himself in high majesty during negotiations

for a final peace between the warring realms of England and France.

In the seven years that had passed since the death of Henry IV, in 1413, Henry had settled an anxious realm. His father's reign had been beset by crises, many of them stemming from the fact that in 1399 he had deposed the ruling king, Richard II, and subsequently had him murdered following an attempt to rescue him from jail. This was the violent beginning to an unstable reign.

Richard had not been a popular king, but Henry IV's usurpation had triggered a crisis of legitimacy. He had suffered ongoing financial problems, a massive insurgency in Wales under Owain Glyndwr and a series of northern rebellions, during one of which the archbishop of York was beheaded for treason. He had been very ill for long stretches of his reign, which had led to clashes with his sons—particularly the young Henry—as they strove to exercise royal authority on his behalf. For all that Henry IV had tried to govern as a mighty and authoritative king, he had found himself reliant on the men who had helped him acquire the throne in the first place: principally his retainers from the duchy of Lancaster, which had been his private landholding before he was crowned. This caused a long-running split in English politics which only his death could remedy. It came, after his final illness, in the Jerusalem chamber of the abbot's house in Westminster on March 20, 1413.

The accession of Henry V—king by right, rather than conquest—reunited England under an undisputed leader. Henry was a vigorous, charismatic, confident king: an accomplished general and an intelligent politician. His reign was notable for success in almost every area of government and warfare. Early on he made significant gestures of reconciliation, offering forgiveness to rebels of his father's reign, and exhuming Richard II from his burial place in Kings Langley, Hertfordshire, and transferring his remains to the tomb Richard had commissioned, alongside his first wife, Anne of Bohemia, in Westminster Abbey. The central mission of his reign was to harness his close relations with his leading nobles to lead a war against France. In this he had been wildly successful: in less than two years of fighting Henry had pushed English power farther into the Continent than at any time since the rule of Richard the Lionheart more than two centuries before.

Catherine's marriage to this energetic young warrior-king represented the culmination of this audacious foreign policy. Kings of England had been fighting their French cousins for centuries, but only rarely with real success. Since 1337 the two kingdoms had been engaged in a period of particularly bitter hostility, which we now call the Hundred Years' War. Many territorial claims, counterclaims and squabbles were folded into this complex and long-running dispute. Underpinning them all was a claim first made by Henry's great-grandfather, Edward III, to be the rightful king of both realms. Not even Edward, a superb campaigner and wily politician, had managed to realize this aim, but in marrying Catherine, Henry was about to come tantalizingly close. With the Treaty of Troyes, sealed in the city's cathedral on May 21, Henry had not only secured for himself a French bride. He also became, as he announced in a letter he dictated, "*Henry* by the Grace of God, *King of England, Heir and Regent of the Realm of France*, and *Lord of Ireland*."2 The Treaty of Troyes redirected the French succession, disinheriting Catherine's seventeen-year-old brother, Charles, the last surviving son of Charles VI and Queen Isabeau, in favor of Henry and his future children. The French crown would pass for the first time into English hands.

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The Treaty of Troyes and the royal marriage that followed were made possible by the woeful condition of the French crown. For nearly thirty years Charles VI had been suffering from a combination of paranoia, delusion, schizophrenia and severe depression, which came in bouts lasting for months at a time. He suffered his first attack while leading an army through the countryside near Le Mans on a hot day in August 1392. Dehydrated, highly stressed by a recent assassination attempt on one of his close friends and frightened by a local madman who had shouted out that he faced treachery on the road ahead, he had been overcome by a

violent fit and had attacked his companions with his sword, killing five of them in an hour-long rampage.3 It took him nearly six weeks to recover, and from this point his life was dogged by psychotic episodes.

Physicians at the time blamed Charles's mental abnormality on an excess of black bile, the "wet" or melancholic humor which was thought to make men susceptible to stress and illness. It was also speculated that his weak constitution was inherited: Charles's mother, Jeanne de Bourbon, had suffered a complete nervous breakdown following the birth of her eighth child, Isabelle.4 Whatever the diagnosis, the political effects of the king's condition were catastrophic. Incapacitating bouts of madness returned every year or so, crippling him physically and mentally. He would forget his own name and the fact that he was a king with a wife and children. He treated the queen with suspicion and hostility and tried to destroy plates and windows bearing her arms. At times he trembled and screamed that he felt as though a thousand sharp iron spikes were piercing his flesh. He would run wildly about the royal residence in Paris, known as the Hôtel Saint-Pol, until he collapsed from exhaustion, worrying his servants so much that they walled up most of the palace doors to stop him from escaping and embarrassing himself in the street. He refused to bathe, change his clothes or sleep at regular intervals for months on end; on at least one occasion when servants broke into his chambers to attempt to wash and change him they found him mangy with the pox and covered in his own feces. A regency council was established to rule France during the increasingly frequent periods of his indisposition. Yet even when Charles was deemed sane enough to rule, his authority was debilitated by the fact that he might at any moment relapse into lunacy.

The madness of King Charles had caused a power vacuum in France. All medieval crowns relied on a sane and stable head beneath them, and Charles VI's derangement was responsible for—or at the very least severely exacerbated—a period of violent unrest and civil war which erupted in 1407 between two powerful and ruthless groups of French noblemen and their supporters. The initial protagonists were Philip the Bold, duke of Burgundy, and Louis de Valois, duke of Orléans, who was the king's brother. They quarreled over land, personal differences and—above all—their relative influence over the regency council. When Louis of Orléans was stabbed to death in the streets of Paris on November 23, 1407, by fifteen masked men loyal to Philip the Bold's son and heir, John the Fearless, murder and treachery became the defining characteristics of French politics. Louis's eldest son, Charles, built an alliance with his father-in-law, Bernard, count of Armagnac, and France swiftly divided into two rival power blocs as the leading men of the realm split their allegiance between the warring parties. The standoff between the Burgundians and the Armagnacs had begun.

Henry V had played the two sides of the French civil war against each other with startling success. In 1412 he signed a treaty with the Armagnacs, offering them his support in return for recognition of English lordship over several important territories in southwest France: Poitou, Angoulême and Périgord, all of which had ancient connections to the English crown. The treaty did not last long. By 1415 Henry had increased his demands to include English sovereignty over Normandy, Anjou, Maine, Touraine and Brittany. This was no arbitrary clutch of estates: he was claiming the lands once controlled by his twelfth-century Plantagenet ancestors, Henry II and Richard the Lionheart. When the Armagnacs refused, Henry invaded Normandy and besieged and conquered Harfleur, the port town at the mouth of the Seine. He then raided his way across the French countryside before finally engaging an enormous French army at Agincourt on St. Crispin's Day, Friday, October 25, 1415.

The two armies met on a plowed field, the mud beneath their feet thickened by heavy rain. Despite the size of the French army, which was perhaps six times that of Henry's, superior tactics and outstanding generalship gave the English the advantage. Henry relied heavily on the use of longbows, which were capable of causing havoc on a crowded battlefield. The king protected his archers from cavalry attacks by driving sharpened stakes into the ground around them. And the bowmen repaid him: firing volley after volley through the air toward the French and their horses, and the men-at-arms who attempted to cross the

battlefield on foot. Numerical advantage meant nothing when the sky rained arrows, and a terrific slaughter ensued. In the words of one eyewitness, “the living fell on the dead, and others falling on the living were killed in turn.” The deaths were disastrously one-sided: more than 10,000 Frenchmen were killed for the loss of perhaps as few as 150 English.5

To prevent any threat of the enemy regrouping, Henry ordered thousands of prisoners and casualties to be killed when the battle was over, with only the highest-ranking spared for ransom. Yet despite this unchivalrous and ruthless command, he had won an astonishing victory and was hailed as a hero. When the news of Agincourt reached England, wild parties broke out, and when Henry returned to London following the battle he was greeted like a new Alexander. Girls and boys dressed as angels with golden face paint sang, “Hail flower of England, knight of Christendom” and huge mock-castles were erected in the streets. “It is not recorded,” wrote one admiring chronicler, “that any king of England ever accomplished so much in so short a time and returned to his own realm with so great and glorious a triumph.”6

In the years that followed Agincourt, Henry had returned to France to make even more spectacular gains. In July 1417 he launched a systematic conquest of Normandy, landing in the mouth of the River Touques, before besieging and brutally sacking Caen, followed by the important military towns of Exmes, Sées, Argentan, Alençon, Falaise, Avranches and Cherbourg, along with every significant town and castle in between.7 Rouen, the capital of the duchy, was besieged and starved inhumanly into submission between July 1418 and January 1419: refugees cast out of the city were refused passage through the English lines and simply left to die of hunger in no-man’s land. By the late summer Henry had become the first English king effectively in command of Normandy since his ancestor King John had been chased out by Philip II of France in 1204. Paris lay within his sights.

With the English menacing their way down the Seine toward the French capital, all of France descended into terrified chaos. Had the Burgundians and Armagnacs been able to resolve their differences and oppose Henry as one, the realm might have been saved. They could not. At a crisis meeting held between the factions on a bridge in the town of Montereau on September 10, 1419, John the Fearless, duke of Burgundy—who had claimed control of the king, queen and court—was murdered by an Armagnac loyalist who smashed his face and head with an ax. (Many years later the duke’s skull was kept as a curiosity by the Carthusian monks at Dijon; the prior of the monastery, showing the skull to the visiting king François I, explained that it was through the hole in his cranium that the English had entered France.) Queen Isabeau and the Burgundians now viewed any other end to the war as preferable to making peace with the detested and treacherous Armagnacs. They sued for peace with Henry, offering him the greatest gift in their possession: the French crown.8 Charles VI was so far gone that he was quite unfit to take part in the negotiations pertaining to the future of his own crown. The peace was sealed in the cathedral of Troyes on May 21, 1420. Its very first clause provided for the marriage of the princess Catherine and Henry V, king of England and now *Heir and Regent of the Realm of France*.

Catherine’s marriage was therefore momentous for both royal houses. French princesses had married Plantagenet kings before: indeed, it was the union between Edward II of England and Isabella of France in 1308 that had mingled rival royal blood sufficiently to provoke the Hundred Years’ War in the first place. Never before, however, had an English and French dynasty come together with the specific aim of settling their two crowns on a single king, as would now be the case whenever the merciful death of the poor, demented, fifty-one-year-old Charles finally came.

The ceremony had its moments of splendor. One later chronicler recorded that on their betrothal Henry had given Catherine a beautiful and priceless ring as a token of his esteem.9 He certainly gave a generous cash gift of 200 nobles to the church in which they were married. French protocol was followed, so a procession would have made its way on the night of the wedding to the couple’s chamber, where the archbishop blessed

the royal bed and gave them soup and wine for their supper.10

When Henry's English guests wrote letters home, they referred to the celebrations in only the most cursory fashion. There were more important matters at hand. Immediately after the couple was married, the king told the knights in his company that they would be leaving Troyes directly the next day to lay siege to Sens, a day's march to the west, where Catherine's brother Charles, now a pretender to the throne, was ensconced with his Armagnac supporters. There would be no ceremonial jousting held to mark the royal wedding. According to a Parisian diarist of the times, Henry told his men that fighting for real at Sens was of infinitely greater value than the mock-battle of the tournament field: "we may all tilt and joust and prove our daring and worth, for there is no finer act of courage in the world than to punish evildoers so that poor people can live."11

As Henry and his followers marched off to pursue their long and bloody war, Catherine was allowed to travel with her mother and father. She spent the winter watching her husband's men move from town to town, laying sieges and either starving or slaughtering their enemies into submission. On December 1, 1420, she watched as her father accompanied Henry on his first formal entry into Paris, where the Treaty of Troyes was formalized and the official process of disinheriting her brother—referred to in official English documents as "*Charles*, bearing himself for the *Dauphin*"—was completed.12 Two months later Catherine set sail from Calais for Dover, leaving behind the country of her birth to begin a new life across the sea. She landed on February 1, 1421, and immediately prepared for her coronation.

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The England in which Catherine arrived early in 1421 was a strong, stable realm, more politically united under Henry's leadership than perhaps at any time in its history.13 During the long centuries of Plantagenet rule, English kings had steadily increased the scope of their power, governing in (usually) fruitful consultation with their great magnates, barons, the Commons in parliament and the Church. England was unmistakably a war state, taxed hard to pay for adventures overseas, but in the aftermath of Agincourt and the steady succession of victories that followed, the realm endured its financial burdens buoyed by a strong sense of triumph. Although Thomas Walsingham, a monastic chronicler based in St. Albans, Hertfordshire, wrote that the year preceding Catherine's arrival had been one "in which there had been a desperate shortage and want of money . . . even among the ordinary people there were scarcely enough pennies remained for them to be able to lay up sufficient supplies of corn," he noted that it was also "a year of fertile crops and a rich harvest of fruit."14

The most common medieval analogy for a state was the literal body politic, with the king as the head. "When the head is infirm, the body is infirm. Where a virtuous king does not rule, the people are unsound and lack good morals," wrote the contemporary poet and moralist John Gower.15 In this respect, England and France could not have been more different. Henry was without doubt a virtuous—perhaps even a *virtuoso*—king, and his realm had accordingly flourished. Henry had enjoyed a thorough political education in adolescence that in adulthood manifested itself in strong and capable kingship based confidently on his birthright. He was personally charismatic, liked and trusted by his leading nobles and successful enough in war to create a tight-knit military fraternity. He had three loyal and able brothers—Thomas, duke of Clarence; John, duke of Bedford; and Humphrey, duke of Gloucester—all of whom were of great value both in governing the realm and pursuing the war abroad. Henry met with the approval of the English church for his vigor in hunting out Lollards, a heretical sect who followed the teachings of the scholar John Wycliffe and held unorthodox views about the dogma of the Catholic Church and the validity of its teachings. He taxed his realm relentlessly, but his personal household expenses were markedly frugal, his exchequer competently run and his war debts relatively controlled. He pleased the people in the shires of England with a tough but impartial drive to reestablish the rule of royal law and stamp out the disorder that had bedeviled his father's reign. Criminals

were often drafted into military service, where their violent instincts could be safely satisfied pillaging and burning among the villages of France.16 “May gracious God now save our king, His people and his well-willing; Give him good live and good ending, That we with mirth may safely sing, *Deo gracias!* [Thanks be to God!],”17 went a popular song of the time—and with good reason, for the prosperous kingdom of England reflected all the virtue of its mighty ruler.

Catherine’s place in her new realm was established immediately on her arrival. The French chronicler Monstrelet heard that she was “received as if she had been an angel of God.”18 The nineteen-year-old queen was provided with a personal staff of her husband’s choosing. The information that reached Walsingham from court was that the queen’s household consisted almost entirely of noble English women. “Nor did any Frenchman remain in her service except for three women of good birth and two maidservants.”19 On February 24 she was crowned at the church of St. Peter in Westminster, and celebrated with a feast attended by most of the English nobility and James I, king of Scotland, a long-term captive at the English court. (James had been captured by pirates off the English coast in 1406 when he was twelve and had inherited the crown during his captivity, over the course of which he also received a full education and was generally treated as an honored guest.) The feast was a showcase for English cuisine. Since it was Lent, no meat was served, but the tables groaned with eels, trout, salmon, lampreys, halibut, shrimps and prawns, great crabs and lobsters, whelks, jellies decorated with fleurs-de-lis, sweet porridges and creams. The “subtleties”—nonedible but visually extraordinary dishes that announced each course of the meal—featured pelicans, panthers and a man riding on the back of a tiger. In each subtlety the new queen was represented as St. Catherine with her wheel, defending the honor of the Church.20

After the coronation, Catherine left Westminster and joined the king on a tour of the Midlands. She traveled through Hertford, Bedford and Northampton on her way to Leicester, where she celebrated Easter with Henry. She found England a profitable and hospitable country. “From the cities thus visited the king and queen received precious gifts of gold and silver from the citizens and prelates of each town,” wrote the chronicler John Strecche.21 But Henry did not tarry long in England. Shortly after Easter he received news that his eldest brother, the duke of Clarence, his deputy and lieutenant in France, had died fighting in Normandy. The war would not wait, and in June 1421 the king and queen crossed the channel again for Calais. Catherine was three months pregnant.

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The queen’s condition meant that she did not stay long in France. She left Henry campaigning against her brother and returned to England to give birth to a rival heir to the French crown. For good fortune on the perilous journey through childbirth Catherine brought with her a treasured relic: the foreskin of the Holy Infant, which was known to be a valuable aid to women in labor.22 With its help she delivered a healthy baby boy in the royal palace at Windsor on December 6, the feast day of St. Nicholas. Every bell in London was rung at once to celebrate the news, and Te Deums were sung in the city’s churches.23 Inevitably, the child was named after his father. But the two Henrys were never to meet.

Henry V’s heroic victories on the battlefield had enabled him to manufacture a situation in which he could claim to be the rightful king of two realms. The task of turning this into a political reality, however, strained every fiber of his formidable being. His intervention in French politics had deepened the rift between the Burgundians and Armagnacs, since to the latter the war now appeared to be nothing less than a struggle for existence. Forces loyal to the dauphin dug in, garrisoning castles wherever they could, determined to resist Henry at any cost. Conquest, it was clear, would be a slow and increasingly draining endeavor.

From October all through the winter of 1421–22, Henry led an operation to besiege Meaux, a small town a few miles northeast of Paris. Meaux was heavily fortified and its defenders put up a fierce resistance. The

siege began late in the year, lasted for more than six months and was a miserable experience for both sides: the garrison was slowly starved while the besiegers outside suffered the horrible privations of winter warfare. It was a long and ugly way to fight a war, but if Henry was to force the whole of France to observe his rights under the Treaty of Troyes, he would have to break the most entrenched of the resistance to his rule.

Toward the end of May, Catherine returned to France to visit her husband, leaving her baby son at home in England, under the care of his nurses. She spent a few weeks at his side, along with her parents. But it was clear to all as summer arrived that not all was well with the king. At some point, probably in the squalor of the siege of Meaux, Henry V had contracted dysentery. The "bloody flux," which brought the agonies of intestinal damage and severe dehydration to the sufferer, was very often fatal, and Henry knew it. He was an experienced soldier and would have seen many of his men suffering the same fate. Henry was cogent and pragmatic enough as the illness worsened to make a detailed will, outlining his wishes for the political settlements in England and France after his death. He died in the royal castle at Vincennes between two and three o'clock in the morning on August 31, a little more than two weeks short of his thirty-sixth birthday. With the same bewildering swiftness that had characterized his life's every action, England's extraordinary warrior king was gone. At home a baby not quite nine months old was set to inherit the crown, the youngest person ever to become king of England.

If the new king was to live beyond infancy—and of this there was no guarantee—England would now face the longest royal minority in its history. Precedent was not promising. Three English kings since the Norman Conquest had inherited the crown as children, and all had endured very difficult times. Henry III was nine years old when he became king in 1216, and in his early years he was dominated by overbearing ministers who used royal power to enrich themselves and their followers. Edward III had been thrust upon the throne at fourteen in 1327 after the forced abdication of his father, Edward II, and for the three years power had been greedily and murderously wielded by his mother, Isabella of France, and her feckless lover, Roger Mortimer, until they were deposed in a bloody palace coup. Richard II was the most recent king to have inherited the crown as a child, in 1377, when he was ten years old. An attempt had then been made to govern as if the boy-king were a competent adult. It was a dismal failure. Within four years of his accession England's government had almost been brought down by the "Peasants' Revolt"—the great popular rebellion of 1381—and Richard's subsequent path to adulthood was beset by political faction and upheaval. He bore the psychological scars to his death.24 The book of Ecclesiastes expressed perfectly England's experience of immature monarchs: "Woe unto thee, O land, when thy king is a child . . . !"25

Matters grew even more complicated when, on October 21, 1422, Charles VI died. He was fifty-three and probably died from causes connected to his long-standing illness. The infant Henry of Windsor was now not merely the new king of England. He was also, under the terms of the Treaty of Troyes, the heir to the English kingdom of France, a political entity that was still the subject of a furious war. The French king's body was laid to rest in the mausoleum at the abbey church in St. Denis. His queen Isabeau would continue to live in the Hôtel Saint-Pol in what was now effectively occupied Paris. Once a powerful, if controversial, force in guiding the realm during her husband's bouts of lunacy, her political days were now over. The English spread scurrilous (and most likely false) stories of her outrageous promiscuity and claimed, all too conveniently, that the dauphin was not really the son of Charles VI. As far as the conquerors from across the sea were concerned, the death of the mad king left them in charge of France. At Charles VI's funeral, Henry V's eldest surviving brother, John, duke of Bedford, had the sword of state carried before him, a gesture intended to demonstrate that he was now, as his nephew's representative, the effective power in the realm.

Yet for all the grandstanding and triumphalism, there was no getting away from the truth, which was that the first king of the dual kingdom was a tiny, helpless baby. An unprecedented and extremely delicate military situation would have to be managed for nearly two decades without a competent hand to guide the way. Only disaster, surely, could await.

2

"We were in perfect health"

BOY-KINGS WERE NOT UNKNOWN in the fifteenth century, but they presented a realm with many difficult questions. A king who was a baby, a toddler, even a young man was perfectly able to *reign*, but he was not in any practical sense able to *rule*. At nine months old, Henry VI had been accepted unquestioningly as rightful and legitimate king. Yet until he came of age, or began to show enough discretion to start taking part in government, it would be necessary to make all the decisions of his public and private life on his behalf. As a child, the king was incapable of choosing his officials and servants or giving direction in war and justice, and insufficiently competent to make critical decisions about succession, on which the security of England rested. Yet these matters could not be ignored for eighteen years until the boy became a man.

This problem had been anticipated, in part at least, by his father. As Henry V lay dying in August 1422, he had gathered his companions around him and given them instructions for the care of his son and his kingdom after his death. Codicils to his will established that responsibility for the young Henry VI's person would fall to his great-uncle, Thomas Beaufort, duke of Exeter. The duke was to have overall governance of the royal person, with responsibility for choosing his servants. In this, he was to be assisted by two men who had been conspicuously loyal to the old king: Sir Walter Hungerford, a long-serving steward to the royal household, and Henry, Lord FitzHugh, a trusted chamberlain. One or the other was to attend the king at all times. (They were later succeeded in their positions by two more soldiers who had been loyal to the old regime: John, Lord Tiptoft, and Louis de Robesart.) But when it came to the practicalities of raising a tiny child, a mother knew best. Catherine de Valois—herself only recently out of childhood—played an equally important role in her son's early life and upbringing.

Catherine's household was institutionally separate from her son's, but in practice they overlapped a great deal. The dowager queen's household finances supplemented those of her son and Catherine was influential in his choice of servants. As a baby, Henry VI was attended chiefly by women: he had a head nurse called Joan Asteley; a day nurse, Matilda Fosbroke; a chamberwoman, Agnes Jakeman; and a laundress, Margaret Brotherman. Little is known about any of the women, but it is impossible to imagine that Catherine had no say in their selection, for they would spend far more time with the boy than she did. When Henry was two years old, Catherine's former servant Dame Alice Boutiller was appointed as royal governess, with an official license from the king's council to chastise Henry from time to time, without fear of reprisals if and when he took offense at his necessary discipline. Even when the king grew older and more men were added to his company, Catherine's hand was still visible. In 1428, Richard Beauchamp, earl of Warwick, took over responsibility for Henry's education, with a mandate to imbue him with the qualities of chivalrous, knightly kingship. But Henry's confessor, George Arthurton, and the head knight of his chamber, Sir Walter Beauchamp, had both been former servants in the queen's household.1

The young dowager queen held extensive lands and properties throughout England and Wales—including the vast Welsh castles of Flint, Rhuddlan and Beaumaris, the imposing fortress of Knaresborough in Yorkshire and, farther south, Hertford Castle, Leeds Castle and Pleshey in Kent, and Wallingford, an ancient royal castle that had been extensively repaired and fitted out for her comfort and benefit. She divided her time between her favorite residences, but for the most part, she stayed near her son in the magnificent royal palaces of the Thames valley, and particularly at Windsor, Westminster and Eltham, in Kent.

Eltham, a favorite royal residence for more than a century, affords a glimpse of the young king's early life. It offered space, grandeur, luxury and comfort for Queen Catherine and plenty of intriguing corners for a toddler to explore. It was surrounded with acres of parklands, and landscaped gardens planted with vines. Stone bridges arched elegantly across its moats and led to a network of outbuildings: the young king could

stumble upon the cooks at work in the kitchen and buttery, the comforting scents of the morning's bread drifting up from the bakery and the more exotic foreign flavors of the spicery. The palace had come into royal hands in 1305 and had been significantly redeveloped three times since the 1350s. In the early years of Henry's reign, yet more money was spent ensuring that it offered all the clean and modern facilities needed to raise a young king.2 Smart wooden apartments with stone chimneys were joined by cloisters to a grand private chapel. Catherine could entertain her guests at night in the hall and a specially constructed dancing chamber, while the king's household kept to his rooms, centering on a private chamber warmed by two roaring fireplaces and lit by stained glass windows, decorated with birds and grotesques and the personal symbols of Henry's paternal grandfather, Henry IV. Royal badges and crowns surrounded the old king's motto: *soueignex vous de moy*; remember me.3 In this chamber, and others like it around the palaces of England, young Henry began his path to manhood and kingship: playing with toys and jewels given to him as gifts at New Year, taking his academic lessons from his tutor, the Oxbridge scholar and medical doctor John Somerset, learning devotions by rote from his prayer book, laughing on feast days at court entertainers like Jakke Travaille or the performing troupe called the Jews of Abingdon, learning to play the two musical organs he possessed, and receiving early instruction in the martial arts, while wearing his specially built "little coat armours" and wielding a long sword. In private, Henry lived the life not of a king, but of a young prince—raised and taught and loved and entertained and (occasionally) punished much like other royal boys before him. Yet in the public sphere of kingship, things were far more complicated.

England was a realm whose government spun like a wheel around the hub of the king's person. Institutionally, it was sophisticated, mature and complex. The king was obliged by his coronation oath to consult his senior noblemen on matters of state, either through a formally composed council or the more informal means of taking counsel, or considered advice, from the great men of the land as he saw fit. When taxes were required, he had to work in partnership with the realm via the gatherings of lords and Commons that met when he called a parliament. Justice was dispensed by increasingly professional public servants answerable ultimately to the court of chancery, and public finance was managed through another ancient and very bureaucratic institution, the exchequer.

But just because it was big and complicated, English royal government was not a machine that could operate of its own accord. Indeed, the machine's smooth operation, and by extension, the fortunes of the realm at large, still depended fundamentally on the personal competence of the king. The magic ingredient that made royal government work was the absolute freedom of the royal will, and it was by exercising his royal will that the king could settle disputes between the great men of the realm, correct abuses and corruption in the system and generally give a sense of leadership and direction to the country. Thus, a confident, decisive, persuasive and soldierly king like Henry V was able to govern a united and peaceful realm. By contrast, a wavering, untrustworthy king without luck or skill on the battlefield and bereft of good judgment, such as Richard II had been, could swiftly see his rule unravel and disorder tear apart the realm.4

Self-evidently, it was impossible for a child to fulfill this part of kingship, which marked the essential difference between *reigning* and *ruling*. Yet from the very day that England learned of Henry V's death, there was an astonishingly sophisticated and united effort by virtually the entire English political community to operate the young king's power responsibly and carefully on his behalf.

On his deathbed, Henry had given instructions that led to his eldest surviving brother, John, duke of Bedford, taking responsibility for French affairs.5 This was uncontroversial: Bedford was the heir presumptive to the French crown, a sober, pious, hardworking man, a canny politician and an effortlessly impressive lord, who projected princely magnificence in everything he did. More controversial were the measures Henry had proposed for government at home in England. One of the codicils to Henry's will suggested that his youngest brother, Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, would be appointed as *tutela* during Henry VI's minority. It may well have been that this term implied simply that Gloucester should have personal responsibility for the

education and upbringing of the new king. However, it was also possible to interpret the term to suggest that Gloucester would wield full regency powers in England, accountable only to the king himself.

Many in England would have approved of this interpretation, for in the country at large Gloucester was held in high esteem. He was a literate and cultured man, with knowledge and interests in every direction, from English, French and Italian poetry and the humanist learning of Italy to alchemy, which was then popular in educated circles. He employed foreign scholars as his secretaries, spent large sums on patronizing and promoting artists and writers, collected books and fostered a learned, courtly atmosphere in his household. Moreover, he was a veteran of the battle of Agincourt, and his beautiful wife, Jacqueline of Hainault, whom he married 1423, was a princess generally beloved by the people of England. He held implacably aggressive views on foreign policy and, although these were not shared by many of his fellow noblemen, Gloucester was seen in London as the champion of mercantile interests and someone who would stand up for native traders.

Yet for all these qualities and his undeniably popular standing among many Englishmen, Gloucester did not command the devotion of everyone around the new king. Although he was a deep drinker of high culture, he could also be pompous and self-regarding. His military career had encouraged him to cultivate a personal reputation for chivalry, but he was decidedly the least impressive of his three elder brothers: for while Henry V had been a peerless commander and a magnetic character, Thomas of Clarence a suicidally brave soldier and John of Bedford a sober strategist, Gloucester tended to place mindless belligerence above all other tactical considerations. His desire for general acclaim alienated others who had a claim to power as well, and made him a curiously shallow leader. Meanwhile, his pretensions to chivalry would founder in 1428 when he callously cast aside Jacqueline of Hainault, having their marriage annulled in order to take up with one of her ladies-in-waiting, a smart and seductive baron's daughter by the name of Eleanor Cobham. Like his older brother Bedford, Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, cultivated a reputation for stateliness and grandeur. His simply rang hollower.

It was perhaps no surprise, then, that when the conditions of Henry V's will became known, a concerted effort was made to prevent Gloucester from taking up the personally dominant position in government that he craved. This resistance was led by Bedford, in alliance with other lords of the royal council. In December 1422, during the first parliament of the new reign, Gloucester was summoned to be told he had been awarded the title of "Protector and Defender of the kingdom of England and the English church and principal councillor of the lord King." Even if it sounded grand, this title was designed to be strictly limited, and it would lapse whenever the more senior Bedford visited England. Neither Gloucester nor anyone else was going to be a lieutenant, tutor, governor or regent. The duke was simply the preeminent man in what would prove to be a very carefully constructed conciliar protectorate—the first such experiment in English history, and one that acted under a very singular fiction. Government was carried out on Henry's behalf, but it also continued as if the child-king were in fact a fully functioning public figure.

Gloucester was bitterly disappointed. Not even the large salary he was awarded to take up his new role could mask the fact that he had been passed over in a manner that suggested not even his own brother, with whom he maintained generally good relations, considered him fit to govern England independently. Yet to his credit, Gloucester did not withdraw from politics or begin to think of rebellion. Despite the sting of personal rejection, he appears to have recognized the same facts that had struck everyone else close to the English crown: that Henry V's death left England in a very dangerous position and that, without a collective attempt to create a stable form of minority government that could last for a decade or more, the realm could very easily end up in the same disastrous condition as that which had afflicted their French neighbors across the sea. Seen in this light, the decision to pass over Gloucester in favor of a form of conciliar rule serving the conceit that the baby king was a genuine ruler was both a piece of wholly artificial constitutional back bending and a stroke of brilliance.

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King Henry VI presided over parliament for the first time at Westminster in the autumn of 1423, when he was not yet two years old. A medieval parliament had no power of its own to speak of, save that derived from the sovereign, whether he was a baby, a grown man or a dribbling geriatric. On Friday, November 12, therefore, Queen Catherine prepared to bring her son from his nursery at Windsor down through the affluent towns and villages that stood on the north bank of the Thames to Westminster, where he would meet representatives of his subjects in the time-honored fashion. Windsor was grander than Eltham, a fairy-tale castle imbued with all the pious chivalric trappings of English kingship: a moated and walled forest of towers and turrets, with glorious painted chambers and sumptuous living quarters, as well as the magnificent Chapel of St. George, home to the Order of the Garter. It was from this tranquil place that in the second week of November, the twenty-three-month-old king—a toddler now, with the beginnings of his own will—was about to be removed.

Henry was not impressed by the prospect of the trip. Although the start of the journey was smooth, and the infant king was well attended by his nurses and nannies, the traveling did not much agree with him. After the first day on the road the royal party spent the night at Staines. Then, on the morning of Sunday, November 13, as Henry was carried toward his mother, seated in her coach and ready to travel onward to Westminster via Kingston, he threw a royal tantrum. "He cried and shremed [i.e., shrieked and thrashed about and wept] and would not be carried further," wrote one London chronicler, "wherefore he was borne again into his inn, and there bode the Sunday all day."6 Only twenty-four hours later, after a day of mollification in his lodgings, would the toddler consent to be taken on toward parliament. Finally, on November 18 he arrived, was presented to the realm on his mother's lap and listened, presumably with no interest whatsoever, to the Speaker, the lawyer and MP John Russell, expressing the thanks of all concerned for their great "comfort and gladness to see your high and royal person to sit and occupy your own rightful see and place in your parliament."7

If all this seemed rather a strained and strange political dance, it nevertheless had profound importance to the men who performed it. Kingship was a sacred and essential office, and in the 1420s every effort was made to draw the young Henry into its symbolic rituals. Day-to-day government was carried out by a council with clear rules and a fixed membership. Seventeen councilors were initially appointed, articles of conduct for their meetings were agreed and a quorum of four was deemed necessary to make decisions binding. The council kept detailed minutes, including the names of those who had made decisions, and it limited itself to carrying out only the essential functions of kingship. It sold offices and titles only for the financial benefit of the crown, rather than for private political patronage. It held absolute and secret control over the royal finances. It was as close to a disinterested political body as could be conceived.

Yet the king was still brought into play whenever it was possible. In the first month of Henry's reign, a solemn ceremony had been held at Windsor to mark the transfer of the great seal of England—the essential tool in royal government—out of the hands of the old's king's chancellor, Thomas Langley, bishop of Durham. The baby was surrounded in his chamber by the greatest nobles and bishops of the land, who watched carefully as the "chancellor delivered to King Henry the late king's great seal of gold in a purse of white leather sealed with the said chancellor's seal, and the king delivered the same by [the duke of Gloucester's] hands to the keeping of [the keeper of the chancery rolls], who took it with him to London . . ."8 The next day the seal was taken to parliament and solemnly handed over to a clerk of the royal treasury for safekeeping.

It was pure theater, but the fabric of English government was materially sustained when the king's soft and tiny fingers passed over the fine white leather of the seal's purse. The same ceremony was repeated nearly two years later at Hertford Castle, when the king was again called upon to hand the seal over to his great-

uncle Henry Beaufort, bishop of Winchester, who had been appointed chancellor in his turn.9 When the king was five years old, the lords of his council recorded in their minutes an astonishingly clear summary of their position: "How be it that the king as now be of tender age nevertheless the same authority resteth and is at this day in his person that shall be in him at any time hereafter."10

This attempt to affect personal kingship was, at times, comical in its confection. Official letters survive, written in the very first years of Henry VI's reign, that were framed not as instructions from older men ruling on behalf of a baby, but with the pretense that the baby himself was a fully functioning adult dictating his royal dispatches in person. One such, written to the duke of Bedford in France, on May 15, 1423, when the king was still a couple of weeks short of eighteen months old, began, "Right trusty and most beloved uncle we greet you well with all our heart and signify unto you as for your consolation that at the time of the writing of this thanked by God we were in perfect health of person trusting to our Lord it as we desire in semblable wise ye so be. . . ."11 Five years later, the king was described in parliament as showing signs of readiness to rule: "The king, blessed be our lord, is . . . far gone and grown in person, in wit and understanding, and like with the grace of God to occupy his own royal power within [a] few years."12 He was six years old.

In fact, conciliar government continued throughout the 1420s. In areas where an adult king would traditionally have intervened in person, such as arbitrating disputes between the great nobles in the shires, a system of mutual oath taking served to keep the peace. It was not always straightforward, but order was generally maintained. Only in 1425 did a personal feud threaten to destabilize the administration completely, when a dispute flared up between two of the most powerful and potentially dangerous men in England: the frustrated protector Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, and the king's rich and influential great-uncle, Henry Beaufort, bishop of Winchester.

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On October 29, 1425, the city of London boiled with excitement. A new mayor, John Coventry, had been elected and was taking office, but as he sat down to his official feast, he received an urgent message summoning him with all the most important men in the city to a meeting with the duke of Gloucester. When he arrived in the duke's presence, he was instructed to secure London as swiftly as possible for the night ahead. He was told that a large armed force was gathering under the leadership of Beaufort on the south side of London Bridge, in the suburb of Southwark. Archers, men-at-arms and a whole array of other men loyal to the bishop were said to be preparing to invade London the next day, determined to do harm to anyone loyal to Gloucester and to cause mayhem in the city. A long, sleepless night lay ahead. The citizens were told to keep watch, and to prepare themselves for a fight.

The background to the quarrel was complex. Gloucester and Beaufort were both capable and experienced men, with vital roles in the minority government. In the absence of the duke of Bedford, they bore, between them, a large responsibility for keeping the peace, but their views on foreign policy and domestic issues frequently clashed, producing mutual suspicion and hostility.

Gloucester's outsized personality was well known, but Beaufort was also an imposing figure. The second son of Henry VI's great-grandfather, John of Gaunt, and his third wife, Katherine Swynford, he had been made a cardinal and legate by Pope Martin V in 1417. The cardinal's personal power and wealth came from his diocese of Winchester, the richest in England, and his public standing came from a long life of service. At fifty, he had held high office in England for more than twenty years, often helping to prop up crown finances by means of vast and generous loans. In 1425 he was the chancellor of England and probably the leading advocate of the conciliar system of government. Naturally conservative, Beaufort had likely helped coordinate opposition among the lords of the council to Gloucester's regency. All this meant that the two

men were, as one chronicler laconically put it, “not good friends.”13

By 1425 their animosity and mutual suspicion were intense. The principal fault lay with Gloucester, who, the previous summer, had led a popular but extremely unwise military expedition to the Low Countries, in pursuit of his wife’s claim to the county of Hainault. Unfortunately, the man who now held Gloucester’s wife’s possessions was her first husband, John of Brabant, who was supported by the duke of Burgundy, a key ally of the English in their war with Armagnac, France, and a man whom Beaufort had spent a great deal of time and effort courting. That Burgundy was greatly upset and antagonized by Gloucester’s heedless aggression was bad enough. To make things worse, the campaign was a total failure. It also stirred up violent anti-Flemish feeling in London, which bubbled over into xenophobic riots and disturbances in the streets. Beaufort, as chancellor, was left to try to calm the capital. He appointed a new keeper of the Tower of London, one Richard Woodville, as a precautionary peacekeeping measure, but this was interpreted as an attempt to intimidate the citizens by putting the fortress that loomed over the city in the hands of a government stooge, and had the effect of arousing still more popular ire. By 1425, Cardinal Beaufort had become the chief public enemy in the capital, perceived to be a friend of foreigners and enemy of native Londoners.

Thus it was that on the evening of October 29, tensions exploded. Beaufort had come to believe that it was his cousin’s intention to travel from London to Eltham to take personal command of the young king, a symbolic appropriation of the source of power that would have amounted to a full coup d’état. It is unlikely that Gloucester really meant to kidnap the king, but Beaufort was not prepared to gamble on the duke’s trustworthiness. He had thus garrisoned Southwark, and, when day broke over a wakeful city, the citizens rushed to the riverbank to see that the south side of London Bridge had been barricaded, with huge chains drawn across it and heavily armed men standing guard at windows, “as it had been in the land of war, as though they would have fought against the king’s people and breaking of the peace.” On the north side of the bridge, Gloucester and London’s new mayor had closed the city gates. It was a standoff whose most likely conclusion appeared to be a deadly confrontation on the bridge itself. There was panic throughout the city. “All the shops in London were shut in one hour,” wrote one breathless chronicler.14

Yet battle was never joined. There was enough passion on both sides of the Thames to have foamed the eddies beneath London Bridge’s narrow arches with blood, but England luckily had cooler heads than those of the two disgruntled uncles of the king. Chief among them were Henry Chichele, archbishop of Canterbury, and Pedro, prince of Portugal and duke of Coimbra, a much-traveled cousin of King Henry, who was then staying in England as an honored guest of the court.15 They led frantic negotiations throughout the day on October 30, their messengers riding eight times between the opposing camps until eventually a truce was brokered.

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