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# If You Can Learn to Do It, I Can Learn to Do It: The Introduction of Humanism to the Court of Henry VII

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If You Can Learn to Do It, I Can Learn to Do It:

The Introduction of Humanism to the Court of

Henry VII

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Senior Honors Project

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Henry VII of England drastically changed the nature of his kingdom. Upon assuming the throne after thirty years of civil war, he restructured the government, creating new councils, positions, financial practices, and noble responsibilities. He consolidated power, married his enemy's daughter, and suppressed rebellions. Historians have studied Henry VII's political and economic policies thoroughly, painting a picture of this fifteenth century ruler as imposing, frugal, and rather unexciting, focused only on strengthening his control over the country. Despite this reputation, Henry VII in fact made immeasurable contributions to England in regard to culture, political structure, and financial security.

Though largely undiscussed, Henry's dedication to establishing England as a court on par with her contemporaries influenced the cultural development of England throughout his dynasty. Following the example of his mother, Margaret Beaufort, he patronized humanist scholars and Renaissance artists in an effort to demonstrate his power. Having lived in continental Europe for over a decade, Henry experienced humanist learning, elaborate art, and grand court culture and understood the importance of implementing these new trends in his own court. These experiences ensured that he changed England not only politically and economically, but also culturally and intellectually. Henry VII's exposure to Renaissance thought on the continent prompted him to implement it in his own court through his employment of scholars and artistic patronage, bringing England out of medieval obscurity and into the Renaissance.

This article addresses these changes by establishing the political and ideological environment Henry Tudor was born into in order to demonstrate the dramatic cultural changes he made during his reign. It then studies the influences that encouraged Henry to implement these changes by integrating humanism into his court. These influences are specifically the intellectual and artistic developments in continental Europe and the examples set by wealthy and successful

royalty, both foreign and domestic. The paper then discusses Henry's court, examining his implementation of humanism in England through the scholars and artists he patronized. It culminates in an analysis of specific works Henry VII commissioned, illustrating the successful incorporation of the Renaissance in England.

*Political and Cultural Makeup of Medieval England*

At the time of Henry Tudor's birth, England remained medieval, lagging behind the rest of Renaissance western Europe. Firmly entrenched in feudalism, a king headed the country by hereditary right.<sup>1</sup> Considered sacred by his subjects, the king theoretically held absolute power over the land. But his real power lay in his vassals, all of whom possessed great wealth, land, and authority of their own. He required the allegiance of the nobility to provide him with armies, taxes, and economic stability. Without this allegiance, he had no strength or ability to protect himself or his country.<sup>2</sup>

Because the nobles possessed such power, they presented a great threat to the king. They functioned as rulers in their own right, with armies to defend their militarized castles, retinues to accompany them when they travelled, and allegiances to strengthen their control. They often fought their own wars amongst themselves. They could have more wealth, strength, and power than the king at any given time, presenting an opportunity for a dynastic overthrow. This threat eventually came to fruition in fifteenth-century England, providing Henry Tudor with an opportunity for kingship. The king, then, needed to understand how to manipulate and control the nobility to keep them indebted to him and content with his rule.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hicks, M. A. *The Wars of the Roses*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010, 25.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 20-25.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 19.

When not fighting among themselves and ruling their own land, the medieval nobility attended court in hopes of earning the king's favor. For all the power the nobles held, the king retained certain powers they could not grasp. He led a government comprised of a parliament and various councils and courts from which he ruled. While Parliament existed to check the king's power, the councils gave the king authority. He sat at the head of law courts, able to determine the fate of any one of his subjects. His chancery, exchequer, and privy seal courts helped him divide his responsibilities and reinforce his status as a divinely chosen ruler. He could promote courtiers and give them roles in these councils. Because he could award positions, give more land, and approve advantageous marriages, a medieval king had a massive influence on the amount of power his nobility could attain, giving them a reason to earn his favor.<sup>4</sup>

The desire to remain in the king's good graces incentivized the nobility to act as courtiers even in medieval England. They attended court and strived to entertain the king. The closer a nobleman became to him, the more frequently he could plead his case, both formally and informally. If the king became fond of him, he might side with them in a dispute with a competing family or award him status and land increases out of familiarity. Additionally, the king's respect and trust gave a favored nobleman more sway at court. While entertaining the king, courtiers could provide him with "informal advice."<sup>5</sup> Providing the king with advice allowed certain members of the nobility to function at a national ruling level. Not only could

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<sup>4</sup> Chrimes, S. B. *Henry VII*. Yale English Monarchs. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999, 97-98.

<sup>5</sup> Hicks, 20.

they attain personal and family honors from the king, but they could participate in ruling England through their relationships with the king and their placement on councils.<sup>6</sup>

With such emphasis on pleasing the king in the upper levels of medieval society, the culture of the court typically followed his example, giving the king exceptional control over the artistic, intellectual, and cultural development of his kingdom. While much of Europe at this time placed a heavy emphasis on court culture, England again lagged behind. Art in the English court functioned primarily to instill a sense of the king's grandeur rather than existing for its own sake. Decorations, luxuriant clothing, and furnishings acted as the most straightforward way to flaunt this opulence. Such displays allowed the king to look and act more powerful, wealthy, and authoritative than his grasping nobility, reinforcing his control over them.<sup>7</sup>

Intellectual trends also followed the king's guidance, and England before Henry VII did not embrace the developing intellectual trends on the continent any more than it did artistic innovation. Intellectualism in the courts of medieval England depended primarily on churchmen. Theologians still held most intellectual sway and frequently had a heavy hand in political developments. Most of the king's advisors came either from the Church or from high-ranking noble families, neither of which presented a viable option for a king who wished to maintain absolute power. Respect for antiquity and for the individual had not yet developed in England, though on the continent, humanists nurtured such respect. Though they did learn how to read, education of kings and their noble counterparts consisted primarily of religious devotion, political maneuvering, household (or country-wide) finances, wartime strategy, governance, and courtly entertainment. These subjects groomed individuals for ruling and entertainment, not for

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<sup>6</sup> Chrimes, 101.

<sup>7</sup> Hicks, 23.

educational or intellectual comprehensiveness, the focus of the newly popular continental humanists.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to managing the internal affairs of his court and his subjects, the king also held primary responsibility for his country in foreign affairs, a role that Henry VI would fail to fulfill, helping to usher in a period of internal turmoil. Just before Henry Tudor's birth, England reluctantly concluded the 100 Years War with France. For the past century, they had struggled to gain control of several territories on the continent as a result of feudal claims. This war famed kings like Henry V for their courage, but for less strategically savvy kings like Henry VI, it hurt their reputation and their tenuous hold over the nobility. Henry VI, the reigning king when the Wars of the Roses commenced in the 1450s, effectively lost the 100 Years War in a significant blow to England. At the completion of the war in the 1440s, Henry VI of Lancaster had destroyed his family's finances, humiliated himself, and earned the disdain of many of his people, undermining his power in a still heavily feudal society.<sup>9</sup>

Henry Tudor was born into this medieval environment in 1457. His father, Edmund Tudor, had a distant relationship with the royal family, but his mother, Margaret Beaufort, could trace her roots back to John of Gaunt, the third son of Edward III. Though an illegitimate Lancastrian line, the Beauforts still possessed royal blood and a reasonable amount of respect at court. They persisted in their support of the Lancastrians throughout the Wars of the Roses.<sup>10</sup> Margaret remained a significant influence in Henry's life throughout his reign, aiding him in the cultural and political development of England in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>10</sup> Chrimes, 13.

Margaret developed cunning political skills throughout her life that she would use to manipulate an opportunity for her son to become king of England. Married three times, the highly educated Margaret Beaufort remained exceptionally pious and shrewd. Her family enjoyed a good relationship with the Lancastrian rulers and she became one of the most eligible heiresses in England. She married twice by age ten and had her only child at thirteen with Edmund Tudor, who did not live long after Henry's birth. Following his death, she married a Stafford lord, a Lancastrian supporter. In 1461, Henry left his mother and lived with Lord Herbert, a Yorkist nobleman. Though she only saw her son a handful of times in the next several years, she remained highly invested in his life and dedicated to his success, advising him to flee England during the Yorkist reigns of the Wars of the Roses. While he lived on the continent, she worked to improve his situation.<sup>11</sup>

While Margaret's political maneuvering certainly helped Henry take the English throne, this opportunity for kingship would not have existed without the tumult of the Wars of the Roses, beginning two years after his birth. In 1459, the York family rebelled against the Lancastrian king, Henry VI. Henry VI, son of the heroic Henry V, did not look like a king. He lacked the imposing image and charisma of his father. His reign began with a minority, giving him a sense of entitlement he could not afford in a court filled with various noblemen struggling to attain his power. He felt that he deserved a great amount of respect due to his kingship but lacked the administrative, strategic, and political skills vital to any king. He remained verbally committed to the public interest, but obeyed poor counsel and made increasingly bad decisions throughout

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<sup>11</sup> Kisby, Fiona. "A Mirror of Monarchy: Music and Musicians in the Household Chapel of the Lady Margaret Beaufort, Mother of Henry VII." *Early Music History* 16 (1997): 206-207.

his reign. In 1453, he went insane, leaving his position open for his cousin, Richard of York, to assume in his name.<sup>12</sup>

Naturally, when Henry VI returned to health in 1455, Richard was reluctant to relinquish his power. He considered himself the most powerful noble in England, and resisted Henry VI's return to power. Unfortunately for him, the Lancastrians would not allow him to retain the throne and war eventually broke out between the two noble families. The wars lasted for roughly thirty years, enveloping England in a period of intense instability for peasants and nobles alike while the Yorks and Lancastrians passed the throne back and forth between themselves. Margaret Beaufort took advantage of the disorder to further her son's interests, managing marriages and alliances to retain his inheritance and, eventually, take the throne. The wars did not end until Henry Tudor returned from France and defeated Richard III of York at the Battle of Bosworth in August of 1485. Under the advice of his mother, he married the daughter of King Edward IV, Elizabeth of York, uniting the warring families and cementing his legitimacy both through force and lineage.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Cultural and Humanistic Influences on Henry Tudor*

While England fought internally, France followed Italy into the Renaissance. Though the different countries and city-states of the continent still warred amongst each other, their internal situations enjoyed far more stability than those of England. France would soon launch an international campaign to expand their control on the continent, focusing on a hereditary claim to Milan. Though rooted in feudalism, its claim to Milan gave it an opportunity for expansion, whereas England's feudal struggles caused it to stagnate. Additionally, the wars in Italy gave France's nobility a common cause to fight for, preventing the nobles from fighting among

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<sup>12</sup> Hicks, 76-81.

<sup>13</sup> Chrimes, 52, 66.

themselves. These wars demonstrated the significant control the French kings had over their nobility at the time, confident enough in their power to leave their country for extended periods of time to wage war, unafraid of a political coup. They also commanded enough dedication from these families to successfully wage international war.

While in Italy, Frenchmen witnessed firsthand the artistic and intellectual developments of the Renaissance that spread throughout Europe and influenced Henry Tudor. Generally considered to have begun in Italy in the fourteenth century, the Renaissance gave birth to new educational pursuits, artistic accomplishments, and lavish court life. Italians nurtured a growing interest in Classical antiquity, developing a cultural movement that consumed Europe. It fascinated the upper classes, fundamentally changing court culture and demanding more rational motivations for religion and politics.

Intellectually, humanism emerged as the single most important development of the Renaissance. Humanism centered on the importance of the individual in the world, placing a new importance on man. In medieval Europe, humanity typically received little praise and no acknowledgement, condemned to a sinful existence striving for God's redemptive mercy. However, with the advent of humanism, thinkers promoted the celebration of man and his accomplishments. This new focus on the individual and his accomplishments is most easily observable in the sudden flood of recorded names in literature and art. Artists began signing their work, becoming known and admired for their individual talent. Humanism moved Europe away from a collectivist, God-centered view of the world and into an environment in which everyone had something to offer.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kristeller, Paul Oskar. "The European Diffusion of Italian Humanism." *Italica* 39, no. 1 (March 1962): 1-2.

Paul Kristeller, a dominant modern humanist scholar, defined humanists specifically as “those scholars who by profession or vocation were concerned with the *studia humanitatis*.”<sup>15</sup> This *studia humanitatis*, the humanities, comprised the focus of academic intellectuals who could identify as humanists. In the beginning of the early modern period, the humanities included grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy as well as a thorough knowledge of the languages of antiquity, namely Greek and Latin. This knowledge of Greek and Latin epitomized the humanist obsession with antiquity. They developed a love for recently discovered texts from the Greek and Roman civilizations and paid more attention to the architecture and sculpture surrounding them in the Italian landscape. Cities like Siena and Florence emphasized their Roman heritage, invoking the image of Romulus and Remus with their adoptive wolf-mother and repurposing dilapidated Roman temples in their cities.<sup>16</sup>

While Kristeller limits his discussion of humanism to scholarly pursuits, the influence of humanism is clearly evidenced in the art of the day as well. Artists revisited Roman work, taking inspiration from the idealized human figures of antiquity and their rounded, simplistic architectural styles. Art became naturalized. Artists portrayed beautiful figures in comfortable, realistic poses. They tried to complete accurate representations of individuals as portraiture exploded in popularity, exhibiting the humanist obsession with the importance of the individual. The natural world also received new attention in artwork of the day. Humanist artists strove to capture the natural world and its inhabitants with new perfection and naturalism. Also in keeping with humanist trends, Greek and Roman mythology regained popularity in art despite

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 1-2.

<sup>16</sup> Hartt, Frederick, and David G Wilkins. *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2011, 127.

the prevailing influence of the Church in Europe. Artists cultivated a deep interest in human anatomy and strove to recreate the idealized nudes of antiquity.<sup>17</sup>

While in its early days humanism existed almost exclusively among intellectuals, it quickly spread to circles of the more generally educated. Italian humanists left their homes to travel to northern Europe. Many ventured to France to study at French universities and eventually found places in the French and Spanish courts where their influence reached the politically and socially affluent leaders of the Atlantic seaboard. Scholars almost universally identified with humanist thought in the Renaissance, leading to a proliferation of humanist tutors and writers. It soon became popular and necessary for political leaders to have undergone humanist instruction. As the *studia humanitatis* spread throughout Italy and then continental Europe, it obtained significant sway in political as well as academic environments. Government officials, princes, and the nobility soon expected their peers to possess an education grounded in this curriculum, making it an essential element of culturally progressive court life.<sup>18</sup>

While continental scholars developed and spread humanism, England remained quite isolated, its ruling class lost in its medieval war, with one glaring exception: Henry Tudor. His experiences in Brittany and France exposed him to this new intellectual trend. Before returning to England and claiming the throne, Henry lived for thirteen years in Brittany and one in France. While in these courts, he experienced the cultural growth of France and Italy.

Henry left England at his mother's urging to escape the dangers of the civil wars. Margaret recognized the danger of having a living Lancastrian male, legitimate lineage or not, during the periods of York control of England and arranged for her son to go to the court of Louis XI when Lancastrian control collapsed in 1471. The king of France had helped reinstate

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 477.

<sup>18</sup> Kristeller, 5-6.

Henry VI during the Wars and received some Lancastrian refugees during this period, leading the Tudors to think he might accept Henry. Nevertheless, this bid for sanctuary was risky: there was no guarantee of Louis' support. Indeed, Louis would likely have sent Henry back to Edward IV for a substantial ransom. Fortunately for the Tudors, Henry instead landed in Brittany by accident and spent most of his time at the court of Duke Francis II.<sup>19</sup>

Henry's time in Brittany seems to have passed in relative peace under the protection of the duke of Brittany, Henry lived there safely for the next nine years. Unfortunately, there is little information regarding how Henry spent his time there. But his presence in one of the most culturally active courts in northern Europe permitted him to experience fully the artistic, educational, and political growth of Renaissance culture in Europe.

The rulers of France, Brittany, and Burgundy had long traditions of patronizing the artistic and cultural developments of northern Europe and eagerly embraced the new Renaissance styles. French courts experienced far less political tumult in the late fifteenth century than their English contemporaries, giving them the opportunity to indulge in cultural growth. The Burgundian court, located outside the eastern border of France, had a history of great rulers and artistic patronage, perhaps best exhibited by Philip the Bold and Claus Sluter in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. For years, Philip the Bold, duke of Burgundy, patronized Sluter, who was one of the most talented and best known medieval sculptors in Europe. Sluter's style shared many elements with the Renaissance. His figures stood in natural poses and possessed a strong sense of drama and human emotion. Though profoundly innovative, the primary purpose of this art was still medieval, exhibiting Philip the Bold's

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<sup>19</sup> Chrimes, 17.

power.<sup>20</sup> Later in the century, Charles the Bold ruled Burgundy with an English wife, Margaret of York. Though not remembered for his cultural contributions during the 1470s, the duke of Burgundy ruled a culturally-forward land and likely continued the traditions of his predecessors in maintaining an impressive court. Indeed, his daughter possessed one of the most sumptuous Books of Hours from the era.<sup>21</sup> Certainly Henry Tudor knew of the English duchess and the artistic patronage of her husband.

While Henry lived in Brittany, it remained an independent and successful dukedom, attracting many humanists and artists. Despite France's struggle to absorb Brittany, it stayed at the forefront of northern Europe's cultural development. It produced one of the most distinguished early modern women, Anne of Brittany, twice queen of France. Anne's frequent but judicious artistic patronage made her a leading cultural force in Europe.<sup>22</sup>

The daughter of Francis II, Anne was born in 1477. This made her an active political force later in Henry's life – he would not have witnessed her patronage while he lived in Brittany. However, they both spent a large amount of time at the court of Brittany and it follows that they shared exposure to similar artistic accomplishments, intellectualism, and court culture at a young age. Anne's development into a cultural force stemmed from her experience of the court of Brittany, one Henry would have shared. Exposed to the same artistic and educational influences, he certainly understood why and how she employed these cultural techniques as she made Brittany, and later France, a cultural center.<sup>23</sup> As a contemporary leader, Anne acted as a

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<sup>20</sup>Smith, Jeffrey Chipps. *The Northern Renaissance*. Art & Ideas. London; New York: Phaidon, 2004, 47-53.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 121.

<sup>22</sup> Brown, Cynthia Jane. *The Queen's Library: Image-Making at the Court of Anne of Brittany, 1477-1514*. Material Texts. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011, 3, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 62.

cultural competitor to Henry. He witnessed the development of her court and her power and instituted policies that kept England on a similar level.

These cultural influences were undoubtedly humanist. Henry had extensive exposure to humanist thought, including the *studia humanitatis*, while under Francis' protection. Many Italian humanist scholars travelled throughout France and Brittany, searching for positions at universities and courts. Francis employed a number of them at his own court, giving Henry direct exposure to them. Moreover, scholars speculate that in Brittany Henry met Bernard André, a humanist who would become influential in his own court. André had a particular expertise in Latin poetry and exhibited a unique talent for recitation and extemporization. These abilities made him stand out from other humanist scholars; Henry Tudor took a liking to him. Bernard André would later play a vital role in the development of humanism in England during Henry VII's reign.<sup>24</sup>

It was during Henry's reign that Anne of Brittany became a vital part of cultural development in Europe, setting a dramatic example of a wealthy, successful court and of a ruler employing art and intellectualism for her own propagandistic benefit. Anne headed two of the wealthiest and most influential courts of the era. As a contemporary ruler, her use of art as propaganda held particular relevance for Henry VII, who seems to have viewed her as a competitor and an example of thriving court culture. She clearly understood the importance of personal appearance in art, as she portrayed herself differently depending on the message she wished to send, demonstrating her keen ability regarding propaganda. As a woman, much of Anne's focus had to center on enforcing her virtues. In her youth, for example, she definitively associated herself with charity, hope, and love, appearing with these virtues as her ladies in

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<sup>24</sup> Andreas, Bernard. *The Life of Henry VII*. Edited by Daniel Hobbins. New York: Italica Press, 2011, 13.

waiting in Guillaume Fillastre's *Toison d'Or*. As queen she remained within feminine expectations, emphasizing motherhood, demurely pictured with her infant daughter. But when the time came for her to display her own power as administrator of Brittany, she did not hesitate.<sup>25</sup>

While married to Louis XII, she acted as the administrator of Brittany, her ancestral home. Previously, when Charles VIII was her husband, he managed Brittany for her, to her chagrin. Though he controlled Brittany during their marriage, she ensured that in any representation of the family, even if only a coat of arms, it remained clear that he had obtained Brittany only through her. When she regained control of her duchy at his death and remarriage to Louis XII, her representations reflect her increased political standing. She began to appear in books without her husband far more frequently in her second marriage, when her confidence in her rule had grown. Appearing alone and strong, as in *La Ressource de la Chrestiené*, she looks like a sovereign, her power no longer only alluded to but openly declared.<sup>26</sup>

Not only did Anne use imagery to send political messages, a strategy Henry would also employ, but much of her patronage went to books, demonstrating her humanist appreciation to her contemporaries and to history. Her image and coat of arms received frequent display in many different manuscripts, most commissioned by her or her husband. She had a significant influence in her choice of appearance in such works and the artists who created them undoubtedly worked to please her. She used this influence to bring the Renaissance into her patronage visually as well as intellectually. In depicting her marriage with Louis XII, she appears nude as the goddess Venus, partially covered with a sheer veil. Anne here displays her

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<sup>25</sup> Brown, 2, 16, 26.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 62, 68.

knowledge and support of Italian artistic developments, clearly illustrating the spread of the Renaissance.<sup>27</sup>

Her love of books could have stemmed from the amount of propaganda she could insert, but it reveals another of her humanist propensities: she controlled the literary patronage system in France almost single handedly.<sup>28</sup> Her near monopoly on books in the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth centuries displayed the active intellectual aspect of her court. She distributed many of these books to the ladies in her court, again illustrating her dedication to humanism, specifically to education, literacy, and history.<sup>29</sup> Her spectacular library and Renaissance patronage during the time of Henry VII's reign marked her as a remarkably educated, wealthy, and respected cultural competitor in a time when he wanted to make his court preeminent in Europe. She not only patronized and disseminated literature, but she sponsored art with heavy classical references, a bold but stylish presentation. Her cultural activism provided a model for Henry to continue his intellectual pursuits in an effort to match the standard she set, ensuring that his dynasty would gain and retain deference.

Henry did not only look outside England for support in his aggrandizing labors. Margaret Beaufort was another influential cultural and political force heavily at play in his life. She thoroughly supported his endeavors and set an example of patronage for him to follow. Though she did not possess as much wealth as the king, she had accumulated a large number of estates in her four marriages and her son awarded her a gift of many more in 1487.<sup>30</sup>

Given her affluent and influential status, she kept her own household. Many members of her household, including confessors, advisors, and musicians, would gain places at court. For

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 144-145.

<sup>30</sup> Kisby, 209.

example, Margaret's confessor, Christopher Urswick, played a large role in conspiring to bring Henry back to England and remained a trusted member of her household. He later served as Henry's own chaplain and served on his Privy Council.<sup>31</sup> His position at the Tudor court kept him closely related to the king and in a position to advise him not only in political matters, but even in his moral and spiritual life. His presence at Henry's court suggest that Margaret's influence reached Henry at a very deep level.

Margaret did not only nurture political opinions and influence, but also supported musicians and scholars in education. As a religious, wealthy woman, she maintained an intricately organized private chapel, in which she patronized many musicians and clergymen.<sup>32</sup> She ensured that her choristers received a solid foundation in Latin grammar as a part of their education from prominent institutions of royal foundations.<sup>33</sup> She clearly supported the humanist developments in Europe at the time, setting an example of educational development and encouraging Henry to help England's intellectual development. Henry also funded education for many of those in his employ, again illustrating the similarities between their courts. Henry's mother's educational, political, and religious influence remained with him throughout his reign.

#### *Humanism in Henry VII's Court*

Upon his assumption of the English throne in 1485, Henry obtained a destitute country, nothing like the wealthy, extravagant courts of France and Brittany. The state of England would not have surprised him; he knew the nobility had divided and landed on either the York or Lancastrian side for the past thirty years. He also knew that Richard III had reigned for two

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 220.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 214, 220.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 216-217.

years after succeeding his equally Yorkist brother, meaning most of the nobility had likely reconciled themselves to a York victory. When he arrived in England and defeated Richard III, Henry landed in a country filled with tired but unruly nobility requiring him to determine those he could trust and those he could not. A lesser king would not have succeeded. But Henry Tudor possessed all the shrewd political skill of his mother and the distinct lack of complacency that tends to accompany those monarchs not born into their positions.<sup>34</sup>

For Henry, England was not only politically chaotic, but foreign as well. Genealogically English, French, and Welsh with thirteen years spent overseas, many of his subjects viewed him as a foreigner.<sup>35</sup> Conquering Richard III with an army of Scottish and French mercenaries did not help endear him to his subjects. He knew little about his own realm, having spent the majority of his youth in Brittany. Indeed, many of his opinions did not match those of his fellow Englishmen – he did not understand the tensions between the different countries on the British Isles and he blatantly preferred French and Breton court manners to those of the English.<sup>36</sup> This cultural clash in addition to his inexperience as a ruler led many to doubt his ability and his right to rule.

His imposition of continental ruling methods introduced a Renaissance style of politics to his court, embroiling it in intrigue and deception.<sup>37</sup> The ruthlessness and conspiracy that accompanied this style meant that he had little patience for disloyal subjects and dealt with rebellious nobility harshly. Having witnessed what a powerful nobility could do to a reigning monarch, he immediately worked to minimize the power they held and did not hesitate to assert

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<sup>34</sup> Chrimes, 177.

<sup>35</sup> Griffiths, R. A. “Henry Tudor: The Training of a King.” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (July 1986): 211.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>37</sup> Grummitt, David. “Household, Politics, and Political Morality in the Reign of Henry VII.” *Historical Research* 82, no. 217 (August 2009): 398.

his power in the form of punishment. Those who maintained their support of York kings and tried to resurrect the Wars of the Roses – a somewhat common occurrence in the north of England – were executed. His marriage to the York princess, Elizabeth, arranged by their mothers, united the warring families and hindered any remaining Yorkist sentiments from taking root, particularly once she produced a Tudor heir. He reorganized the governmental structures in place, instituting new councils, consolidating his power in the form of star and privy chambers.<sup>38</sup>

With the nobility firmly in hand, Henry set about reconstructing crown finances. He instituted new taxes and wardships and famously attended to the crown's finances himself nightly. He earned a reputation for frugality and severity in his earnestness to regain solvency in England.<sup>39</sup> Though frugality did not suggest Renaissance extravagance, it allowed Henry the financial stability to import elements of humanism into England, allowing his court to grow culturally and eventually compete with continental courts.

Despite his thorough occupation mending a destitute treasury, taming a rebellious nobility, and reorganizing governmental structures, Henry nevertheless aspired to invigorate England's stagnant cultural development. Perhaps because of the plethora of other elements of change in Henry VII's reign, few historians have dedicated themselves to studying Henry's cultural contributions, particularly in light of his far more dramatic successor. However, none of the opulence of Henry VIII's court could have existed without his father's dedication to bringing humanism to England intellectually, artistically, and popularly.

Henry VII's motivations for developing England's court culture likely did not lie in altruism. As the founder of a new dynasty, he sought to consolidate his power, multiply his wealth, and elevate his reputation. He therefore needed to observe and then surpass other

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<sup>38</sup> Chrimes, 97-103.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 194-195.

European courts. His experiences in Brittany and France shaped his political strategy and cultural inclinations, facilitating his knowledge and use of humanism as a propagandistic tool to cement and strengthen his rule. Not only did Henry lean on his experiences as a young man in Brittany, but he witnessed the development of contemporary courts, monitoring their wealth, prominence, and methods for achieving Renaissance brilliance. Anne of Brittany led two of these courts, definitively demonstrating the patronage necessary to impress her power, wealth, and intelligence on her subjects and contemporary rulers. Henry, as the founder of a new dynasty, wanted to accomplish these impressions himself.

In order to establish his dynasty as legitimate, Henry first needed to maintain a close eye on the nobility throughout his reign, keeping those he did not trust especially close in addition to those whose presence he actually valued.<sup>40</sup> He therefore created a court environment filled with traditional activities--hunting, hawking, dancing, and flirting among them--in an effort to keep the nobles preoccupied with less important tasks than running his government. It also allowed him to maintain an awareness of what his subjects actually wanted.<sup>41</sup> By ensuring this light-hearted merriment and refocusing the nobility, he could turn his attention to more serious cultural advancements. In addition to this seemingly frivolous but politically driven entertainment, Henry sustained a number of humanist scholars, ensuring that this court would serve as a center for intellectual development in England.<sup>42</sup>

The scholars present at Henry's court used their writing to support his position on political issues, demonstrating Henry's success in reinstating internal stability to the English

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<sup>40</sup> Gunn, S.J. "The Courtiers of Henry VII." *The English Historical Review* 108, no. 426 (January 1993): 26.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

<sup>42</sup> Carlson, David. "Politicizing Tudor Court Literature: Gaguin's Embassy and Henry VII's Humanists' Response." *Studies in Philology* 85, no. 3 (Summer 1988): 280.

court. A cycle of angry correspondence with humanists at the French court illustrates this political function well. When a French court humanist, Gaguin, wrote a poem insulting the English and criticizing their customs, they responded critically. Upon his allegation that Henry VII was bellicose and ungrateful, they retorted that the king preferred the court at Brittany over France.<sup>43</sup> With this exchange, humanist scholars at the conflicting courts demonstrated the rather hostile relationship between monarchs in an academic setting, revealing the political tone of Henry VII's court. Additionally, this conversation with French scholars demonstrates that England had, by this point, returned to the international stage, revealing Henry's success in stabilizing his country and securing the nobility. Moreover, this incident shows that Henry had established a number of intellectuals at his court able to compete with his contemporaries on a cultural level.

Beyond bickering with competing courts and their scholars, the humanists at Henry's court performed other duties. One of their central functions was to tutor Henry's children. The scholars known to have taught the heirs of Henry VII included Bernard André, Thomas Linacre, John Rede, John Skelton, John Holt, Giles Duwes, and William Hone. Henry's choice of who would receive positions as royal tutors differed greatly from tradition. He purposefully chose prominent humanist scholars, some of whom had unusual fortes. Bernard André and John Skelton, for example, both specialized in poetic oration.<sup>44</sup>

Henry's choice of tutors clearly illustrates his knowledge of the growth of humanism and the need for a foundation in the *studia humanitatis* to rule successfully in the court culture of Renaissance Europe. He ensured that his successors would also value humanism and possess the

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<sup>43</sup> Carlson, 280-283.

<sup>44</sup> Carlson, David. "Royal Tutors in the Reign of Henry VII." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 255.

education needed to command respect from other leaders. His own humanist experience from his time in Brittany would fade in England if he did not ensure its survival as an integral part of court culture. By ensuring that the future leaders of his court had a firm background in the New Learning, he could assume that they would perpetuate it in their own courts. Establishing humanist scholars in his court allowed England to emerge from its medieval intellectualism and progress with leading courts on the continent.

He brought humanist scholars from France and Italy to create an intellectual court culture on par with those of the more stable and developed courts on the continent. The establishment of humanism as a valid and important educational and intellectual method during his reign ensured the continued growth of the English court's reputation throughout the courts of his successors, a task he entrusted to the scholars he chose. Two of the most prolific of these writers, Bernard André and Polydore Vergil, composed histories of Henry VII's reign to further his propagandist goals, demonstrating the grandeur and success of his dynasty's court in a fashion appealing to Renaissance contemporaries.

Bernard André, the poet laureate at Henry's court and tutor to his children, provides a stunning example of the immense presence of humanism at the English court in his official biography of Henry VII, *Vita Henrici Septimi*. Though likely incomplete, André provided the first account of Henry's life, filled with poetic praises and classical comparisons. He emphasizes the royal ancestry of Henry Tudor and recognizes Henry as a good and natural leader by other rulers and by his subjects. The presence of these traditional, feudal methods of legitimacy demonstrates the continuity of medieval tradition despite the growth of humanist culture. However, he also sings of the virtues of Henry and his family while thoroughly condemning Richard III as a villain in a manner reminiscent of ancient texts. These continuous themes in his

work likely emerged as a request from the patron and illustrate the cultural propaganda Henry used to legitimize his reign.<sup>45</sup>

André presents Henry both as a saintly hero and a figure from antiquity. On the eve of his departure for England from Brittany, he offers a humble prayer to God, comparing himself and his army to the Jews escaping oppression from the Persians, Egyptians, and the Romans, establishing himself as a kind of Moses and begging aid from God as a humble Christian rulers should. In response to this prayer, André recounts a thoroughly classicized speech by one of Henry's noble subjects in which the future king is compared to Julius Caesar and other heroes from antiquity: "So spoke the tireless and victorious Julius Caesar...so too Pompey the Great and Lucius Cataline, and so too each good leader of whom we read."<sup>46</sup> This comparison to great figures from classical antiquity establishes Henry as a skillful and magnificent conquering ruler as well as a humble Christian.

André employs both medieval and classical measures to authenticate the first Tudor's reign. He places an emphasis on Henry's lineage early in his work to satisfy feudal requirements and discusses Henry's saintliness, but floods his book with classical references. Not only does André establish Henry as a great conqueror like those from antiquity, but André reveals that the men who follow him all possess thorough humanist knowledge, through their comments to the king. His emphasis on the enlightened education of Henry and his followers further validates his reign to any students of the *studia humanitatis*.

André fills his biography with songs and poetic orations reminiscent of classical epics and plays. As a poetic orator, his flair for creativity helps present Henry as an admirable and heroic ruler freeing his people from the oppression of the regime of Richard III. His

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<sup>45</sup> Hobbins, 13.

<sup>46</sup> André, 22-24.

representation of Elizabeth of York, Henry's wife, mimics that of the Virgin Mary, an unsurprising comparison for the time as there existed no better role model for women in the intellectual environment of Christendom. She offers many eloquent prayers to God, illustrating her devotion to Henry VII. Her manner of speaking and behavior would remind any theological scholar of the Virgin. According to André, Elizabeth possessed "marvelous piety and fear of God, remarkable respect for her parents, an almost incredible love for her brothers, and noble and singular affection toward the poor and ministers of Christ were instilled in her since childhood."<sup>47</sup> She shared all these traits with apocryphal accounts of the Virgin Mary. Later, however, she receives a prophecy filled with references to Calliope, Jove, and other pagan gods, illustrating the dual nature of the text.<sup>48</sup>

The presence of theological references in this primarily classical text illustrates the transitory nature of his reign. Henry's introduction of humanism reached a thoroughly medieval court, meaning that any propagandist goals necessitated overlap of this new intellectual system and the old, theologically based scheme. This text supports Henry's highly propagandistic goals by praising him extensively while ensuring that André's message is not lost on those who have not yet accepted the *studia humanitatis*.

André also places a heavy emphasis on the education of Henry and his son, illuminating the value Henry placed on humanism and the portrayal of himself and his heirs as progressively educated. Early in his narrative, André assures the reader that Henry received tutelage from the "best and most upright instructors." Despite their presence, André informs the reader that Henry "was endowed with such sharp mental powers and such great natural vigor and comprehension"

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 36.

that his tutors needed to exert very little effort for him to learn the material.<sup>49</sup> He does not stop with praising Henry's education, but continues onto Arthur's early history as well. As one of Arthur's tutors himself, André knew of the prince's educational pursuits in detail. He gives great respect to an earlier tutor of Arthur's, John Rede, for giving the prince a thorough background in his studies before André reached him. Rather than listing his own accomplishments with the prince, André discusses the works of classical literature Arthur had "committed to memory or at least turned the pages of or read on his own" by age sixteen, illustrating his innate propensity to scholarly pursuits and his immense intelligence and natural drive.<sup>50</sup>

The elements of Henry's life André chooses to address reveal the purpose of *Vita Henrici Septimi*, which lies in its propagandist glorification of Henry, emphasizing his moral character and genealogy. Focusing primarily on Henry's legitimacy, education, and virtue, André engages in a minimal discussion of Henry's foreign affairs and noble challenges. Though he addresses the manner in which Henry comports himself in such affairs and the ways others perceive him, he does not focus on the overarching historical circumstances in which Henry worked. Instead, he glorifies Henry VII in a blatantly classical style. This work begins a tradition of Tudor propaganda continued by Thomas More and Shakespeare, particularly in their representations of Richard III, a nefarious character even in André's work. André does not bother recounting most details of Henry's life, nor internal or external political events. He allows other historians to fill this gap.

One such historian, Polydore Vergil, worked to create a thorough and realistic portrait of the first Tudor ruler, displaying a different, but no less valid, element of humanism from his contemporary, André. He completed his own *Anglica Historia* during the reign of Henry VIII,

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 39.

Henry VII's successor. An Italian, Vergil worked as a humanist at Henry VII's court and remained an active member of Henry VIII's court after his death. His purpose in writing a history of England stemmed from a desire to record a truthful account of the events that occurred in the country, a task he felt he could undertake objectively due to his foreign birth and upbringing. He succeeds in his impartial account until he reaches contemporary events, praising the Tudors and openly criticizing the chancellor, Cardinal Wolsey.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, Vergil refrains from glorious descriptions of the first Tudor monarch, choosing instead to record the details of his reign independently and without ceremony. His humanism lies in his objective and relatively realistic approach, emphasizing the reality of the people he discusses. Though far more objective than André, he reinforces the beauty and virtue of the queen and the heavenly intervention and approval of God.<sup>52</sup>

While recording the life of Henry VII, Vergil diverges from his account to include social and economic changes in history, mentioning an outbreak of disease that affected the common people and offering advice for remedying it. His account provides a far more thorough description of Henry's conquest of England. He discusses the Lambert Simnell affair and lists the nobles who remained loyal to the Yorkists and the ways Henry dealt with them, notably his mother-in-law, Elizabeth Woodville. Henry deprived Elizabeth of her wealth and property, apparently because she had deprived his supporters of their own property during his exile.<sup>53</sup>

Not limited to domestic issues, Vergil records Henry's policies with the continent in great detail as well. This discussion of Henry VII's foreign affairs includes some conversation of Henry's personal feeling and of his strategic ability while reaffirming his dedication to England.

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<sup>51</sup> Vergil, Polydore. *Anglica Historia*. Edited by Denys Hay. London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1950, 9-10, 29.

<sup>52</sup> Vergil, 7.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 13-19.

Not only does Vergil establish Henry's personal ability as a ruler, but he considers Henry's humanity, an aspect of the king frequently disregarded in favor of his strict frugality and assumed sternness. In Vergil's account, Henry experiences "fear and despair" as a result of his betrayal by the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian.<sup>54</sup> Vergil transcends André's glorious portrayal of the king, turning him into a relatable figure. Vergil's Henry is not a god; he still possesses human sentiment, feeling, and knowledge. Rather than using this human knowledge to make mistakes, however, Henry always makes the right decision, always placing the good of the country over his own.

Many humanist writers wrote to please their patrons, much as André did. However, Vergil's praise of Henry VII did not stem from a donor request. Though he rarely criticizes Henry VII, his contempt for his successor, Henry VIII, makes itself clear later in *Anglica Historia*. Written during the years of Henry VIII's reign, Vergil commented negatively on Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon. He recounts in great detail the legal proceedings undertaken by the king and makes sympathetic comments regarding the queen, quite plainly supporting her case.<sup>55</sup> His resolution to criticize, however subtly, one king validates his positive account of Henry VII.

Though humanism manifested itself most clearly in the writings of scholars, its traits present themselves in other ways. Fifteenth century Italian art displays many humanist influences, the realistic portrayal of nature, classical references, and imitation, and the exponential growth of portraiture and legitimate portrayals of individuals all patently support the infiltration of humanism to other fields. Henry VII did not underestimate the use of art for propaganda or for demonstrating the richness and modernity of his court. He certainly knew of

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 327.

Anne of Brittany's frequent use of art to glorify Brittany, France, and herself. His mother also patronized art at royal universities. Henry also employed this strategy to demonstrate his success. In doing so, he did not settle for stale, gothic artists but again recruited men from Italy to improve the style of his commissions. The artist he employed most regularly was Pietro Torrigiano.<sup>56</sup>

Torrighiano created possibly the most well-known likeness of Henry VII in a portrait bust that emphasized the main traits of Renaissance portraiture: realism and sitter personality.<sup>57</sup> This portrait bust bears a striking resemblance to the death mask of the same man, causing scholars to conclude that the same artist composed both statues and that the portrait bust indeed presents an accurate portrayal of the fifteenth century king.<sup>58</sup> This bust presents a precise likeness of Henry while emphasizing qualities he must have valued in a ruler. His face resembles both his funeral effigy and a painting by Michael Sittow, featuring a long nose, prominent cheek bones, deep-set eyes, and thin lips. Henry's expression is stern and discerning – he appears distinctly sentient. Torrigiano dressed him regally but simply. Though the statue currently bears colored clothing as a result of restorations, the original paint refrained from any ostentatious displays. Henry originally wore black and vermillion with ermine, but the statue has since suffered repainting.<sup>59</sup> Torrigiano did not merely depict Henry's features. He afforded them significant detail, carving wrinkles and creases in Henry's face and neck, displaying brutal realism in depicting the effort the king expended in conquering and ruling England. Torrigiano clearly brought this realism

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<sup>56</sup> Galvin, Carol, and Phillip Lindley. "Pietro Torrigiano's Portrait Bust of King Henry VII." *The Burlington Magazine* 130, no. 1029 (December 1988): 892.

<sup>57</sup> Syson, Luke. *Leonardo Da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011, 96.

<sup>58</sup> Galvin, 892.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 843.

from Italy, where painters and scholars studied the importance of individual accomplishments and the severely accurate portrait busts of the Roman Republic.

The most striking humanist aspect of this sculpture, however, lies in Torrigiano's depiction of Henry's personality through art, another vital aspect of Renaissance portraiture. Henry's cocked head twists to the side, his eyebrows raised, giving him a distinct expression of harsh consideration. Another vital Italian development, the movement of Henry's head conveys a sense of life. The bust does not portray a static, unseeing figure, but an authoritative, intelligent, and indefatigable ruler. Torrigiano not only portrays Henry's physical likeness, but strives to capture his personality as well. Many Renaissance portraitists worked toward this goal, trying to give their work more intensive meaning. Leonardo da Vinci, active during the same period, still commands respect and admiration for his enigmatic portraits and figures. Torrigiano's efforts were hardly unique during the late fifteenth century in Italy, but such lively realism was remarkable in northern Europe.<sup>60</sup>

As a ruler, Henry demanded complete control and respect when dealing with internal and external affairs, his strict policies the subject of much study. However, his cultural contributions, though largely ignored by historians, followed the same pattern as his economic and political enterprises. Henry demanded the best. He wanted his reign and his dynasty to command the same respect as the old houses of Europe. To accomplish this goal, Henry employed humanist scholars to advise him, educate his children, and serve in other court positions. He patronized artists to modernize and aggrandize his court, universities, and his memory. These humanists provided the limited written accounts of this era and communicated with the continent, demonstrating the development of England from internal chaos to a vital competitor. They

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<sup>60</sup> Syson, Luke. *Leonardo Da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011, 96.

served as ambassadors, educators, scholars, and advisors, inundating Henry's court with humanist thinking, indicating Henry's primary concern with the intellectual culture of his court over artistic or more frivolous developments.

Henry's efforts to firmly situate his dynasty among a nobility accustomed to weak and temporary kings necessitated acknowledgement from other rulers and a general feeling of power and authority. By ushering in cutting-edge thinkers and art, he succeeded in generating this mentality and establishing himself among the nobility and other rulers. Certainly his attempts to firmly entrench his country in humanism and the Renaissance remained successful after his death. His son, Henry VIII, continued his tradition of sponsoring humanists, now finding English thinkers, notably Thomas More. Henry VIII developed an extraordinarily grand court culture, striving to compete with Francis I of France. Henry VIII and his children, primarily Elizabeth I, carried England through the Renaissance, making it a leading cultural country throughout the sixteenth century. Their continued humanist sponsorship vindicated the efforts of Henry VII, confirming the success of his humanist importation and Renaissance court culture.

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