



Henry VI,
David Grummitt
(Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

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Henry VI. By David Grummitt. Abingdon, Routledge. 2015. ISBN 978-0-415-63993-4. 262 pp. US \$44.95.

The troubled reign of Henry VI — arguably one of the most unfortunate kings in English history — has sparked a great deal of debate amongst historians of late medieval England and the Wars of the Roses. Medieval kings often present elusive subjects to the modern researcher, yet perhaps none more so than Henry VI. Under his rule England entered a period of military defeat abroad, economic recession, rebellion, and civil war. As a result, there have been a number of monographs dedicated to Henry's reign and kingship in an effort to explain how such a man so ill-suited to the royal office managed to reign peaceably for so long despite his many personal failings and political missteps. Henry's agency in tackling the problems facing the regime has been brought into question by Professor John Watts in his book *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship* (1999) which is an investigation of late medieval political culture rather than a biography of the king.

The latest examination into the reign by Dr David Grummitt attempts to answer these questions in a monograph that is remarkably brief given the thirty-nine year reign of its subject. This work is best divided into two major segments with the first two chapters focusing on providing a new paradigm of Lancastrian identity described as 'Lancastrianism' or the 'Lancastrian Legacy'. It then turns to examine Henry's reign in the more traditional chronological approach normally found in the Routledge biography series. Through the lens of the cultural values he believes to be distinct to the House of Lancaster, Grummitt aims to explain how a king so unfit to his royal birth-right managed to reign for nearly forty years and command the loyalty of most of his subjects for the majority of his rule even after his cause was irreparably damaged.

After surveying the historiography and source material in the introduction, Grummitt establishes an admittedly fluid definition of Lancastrianism as one comprised of distinct principles which were: the public commitment to good governance; dynastic loyalty built through strong records of service; a distinctive religious orthodoxy; and international ambition pursued by war and diplomacy. This broad definition is explored in greater detail in chapters two and three entitled 'The Lancastrian Legacy in England' and 'The Lancastrian Legacy: War and Diplomacy' respectively. Grummitt illustrates the complex domestic and international political legacies unique to the House of Lancaster that Henry VI inherited from his predecessors John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster; Henry IV; and Henry V. Grummitt contends 'The Lancastrian Legacy' shaped the king, defined his reign and left it open to a level of unparalleled scrutiny from contemporaries. This book is based on thorough research and Grummitt does an admirable job synthesizing recent studies that go beyond than the high politics of the reign. Consideration of Professor Nicholas Orme's investigation into medieval grammar schools, as well as Drs Jenni Nuttall and Catherine Nall's work with late medieval literature, is particularly

pertinent as these materials provide alternative windows into how the politics affected everyday life and shaped the voices outside the government. Grummitt's analysis of the reign nevertheless remains rooted in the Lancastrian identity and the values that comprised it. Given Henry's personal piety, the king's initiative is tied in convincing fashion to such actions as the establishment of Eton College, the peace policy toward France, and the ill-advised and ineffective 'Loveday' with the Yorkist lords, which are all viewed by the author as consistent with the concept of piety and religious that was the Lancastrian tenet Henry cherished most, even to his own detriment.

The premises presented throughout this study are intriguing, but the rather nebulous notion of 'Lancastrianism' remains quite problematic. Throughout the book Grummitt presumes that contemporaries were not only aware of each of the distinct pillars of the Lancastrian Legacy, but that it was at the forefront of their minds when comprehending royal policy and served as a direct influence upon their response. Is it likely that contemporaries would have tied the actions of Henry VI to that of his great-grandfather or grandfather, as the author has done? It is difficult to surmise if this measuring stick is appropriate. Grummitt suggests Henry's failures in the 1440s were the result of his kingship having developed from the "contradictory strands of thought and behaviour that constituted Lancastrianism" (p. 123). The previous Lancastrian kings navigated this tension within 'Lancastrianism' safely. It would therefore be safe to presume that Henry VI's failures were not due to the legacy, but rather his own personal short-comings compounded by the economic and political problems facing his regime. Additionally, the "contradictory strands" of the legacy presents another problem. The lack of coherence due to the tension and contradictions within 'Lancastrianism' undermine whether or not it was an identity at all. Grummitt sets Henry VI's policies within the context of a legacy filled with contradictory tenets and asserts specific pillars as the motivation behind royal action. Continuity in nature over time is an integral part of identity, but consistency appears to be lacking when trying to apply the concept of 'Lancastrianism', and Grummitt himself admits the legacy contradicts itself and held different meaning to different individuals. Lastly, it is doubtful whether many of these pillars of 'Lancastrianism' were distinctly Lancastrian at all. International ambition pursued through warfare and diplomacy is one such example of a supposed mainstay of Lancastrian policy that featured in the reigns of other late medieval kings, particularly Edward IV. Additional discussion illustrating how the tenets of Lancastrianism were truly distinct from previous reigns would have been a welcome addition.

The primary audience for this book will likely be undergraduate students in need of a readable survey introducing Henry VI's complex reign in a manageable fashion. For the more advanced student of the reign, Professor Ralph Griffiths's vast and detailed tome *Henry VI* (1981) should remain the first port of call. The Lancastrianism premise offered in the opening chapters will be controversial and will undoubtedly spark yet another round of fresh debate amongst the late medieval community regarding Henry VI and the origins of the domestic conflict which

ended his dynasty.

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