

Review Article: The English Court

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THE TUDOR COURT. David Loades. Batsford, London. 1986. £19.95.

THE ENGLISH COURT, FROM THE WARS OF THE ROSES TO THE CIVIL WAR. Edited by David Starkey. Longman, London. 1987. £7.95.

THE ROYAL COURT, and the king's household which formed its heart, has until recently been one of the Cinderellas of English history, except in its role as patron of the arts. Only now are its political and social functions being brought properly into focus. In a seminal article in the *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* for 1973, David Morgan (one of the contributors to the Starkey volume) showed how fruitful this line of enquiry could be for the Yorkist period. More recently, Chris Given-Wilson has taken the analysis of the royal household back into the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.¹ The present volumes, appearing within a year of each other, carry the story into the early-modern period.

The two books are very different in their approach and, one imagines, their potential readership. Professor Loades offers a broad survey of the Tudor court for the general reader, embracing topics such as the royal image, scholarship and court patronage of the arts. Dr. Starkey and his contributors are primarily concerned with the political role of the court, and their work is consciously, and excitingly, revisionist — the editor in particular taking to task those historians who have underestimated the crucial significance of the court in government. One manifestation of this different approach is that where the Starkey volume is deeply concerned with changes within the royal household, which are seen as indices of political change, Loades has virtually nothing to say about the household, except in his discussion of Henry VII where he is, in any case, drawing on Starkey's work. He is concerned, rather, with the high profile courtiers, mainly aristocrats, who can be seen jousting, having their portraits painted, or embroiled in struggles for influence over their monarch. His section on 'Faction and political strife' is, indeed, little more than a straightforward, chronological narrative of noble involvement in political life. Where Loades does turn to the household he is less at ease, notably in his extraordinary suggestion that the knights of the body had disappeared by 1494 and were resurrected by Henry VIII [pp.46-7]. He had only to open the relevant volume of the *Calendar of Patent Rolls* to find any number of knights of the body mentioned in the period during which he claims that 'there is no reference to

them' [p.220, n.31]. The basis of his argument appears to be that the knights are not mentioned in a household ordinance of 1494 — but then nor are they explicitly mentioned in the *Black Book* of Edward IV's household, except insofar as some of their number were used as carvers, and yet there is independent evidence of their importance at court in that reign.

Both books include discussion of the pre-Tudor court, and it is their handling of that topic with which this review is primarily concerned. The Starkey volume begins in the mid-fifteenth century, in keeping with its editor's belief, developed elsewhere, that it was that period, rather than the 1530s, which brought the real revolution in government.² In a stimulating article, David Morgan investigates the household in the reigns of Henry VI and Edward IV, and suggests that it was this period which saw the full emergence of the idea of a court, rather than simply a royal household. It is an important argument, but its implications are rather obscured by the context in which it appears. None of the other contributors to the volume really takes on board the possibility that the late-medieval household should be seen as the forerunner of Tudor developments, and, as a result, the book cuts off the Yorkist court from its medieval antecedents without integrating it fully into the early-modern world.

In his introduction, David Starkey does indeed attempt to build Morgan's views into the longer perspective offered by the volume, but once he is embarked on his discussion of changes in the courts of Henry VII and VIII the Yorkist experience is handled less positively than one might have hoped. In organizational terms, Edward IV's household is seen as 'an end not a beginning' [p.72], with the real change coming with Henry VII's reforms of the 1490s, which established the Privy Chamber. But from the medieval perspective this change looks far more conservative than radical, in spite of its new terminology. The growth in size of the household under Henry VI and the Yorkists had inflated the numbers of royal body servants to the point where it was impossible for them all to be on intimate terms with the king. Henry VII's retreat into his Privy Chamber was a reaction against this trend; he maintained the Yorkist use of the household as a means of giving institutional identity to the king's local allies but also re-established alongside it the much older image of the household as a small circle of intimate servants.

If the Starkey volume can be criticized, from the point of view of the late-medievalist, for not fully living up to the wider perspective promised by Morgan's article, the Loades volume hardly has a medieval perspective at all. In spite of the author's claim to begin his investigation of the Tudor court at 1461, his treatment of Edward IV is superficial. His view of the reign derives entirely from the biography by the late Charles Ross (Morgan's 1973 article is not even mentioned), and he follows Ross in arguing that Edward's government was characterised by an unwise concentration of power in the hands of a small number of nobles. This view, which has become the current orthodoxy, virtually ignores the household, and allows Loades to present Edward IV as an object lesson in the misuse of the court. In fact, it is profoundly misleading. Edward's willingness to build up the power of men such as Hastings or Gloucester was only one end of a spectrum of delegation, which also included a major role for the household. As the Crowland Chronicler recognised, the real characteristic of Edward's reign was his knowledge of, and willingness to exploit, more

humble men, and his household can more properly be presented as one of the great political creations of the later middle ages.

Neither book has much to say about Richard III. Loades, indeed, ignores his reign completely. When Richard is mentioned it is as a demonstration of Edward IV's failure rather than as a king, and the chronological progression within each chapter is from Edward IV to Henry VII. Only once is this silence explained, when, in his discussion of the royal image, Loades comments *à propos* of Mary Tudor that her historical image, like that of Richard III, was created by her enemies after her death and therefore does not properly belong to his discussion [p.34]. This, of course, is true; but it is also true that Richard III had an extremely well-developed perception of himself as good prince, which he hammered home in his public pronouncements. His reign could have been usefully explored as an example — to set against the success stories of 'good king Henry the eighth' or 'Good Queen Bess' — of how image-building by a monarch could fail.

If in the end the Yorkists come rather badly out of these studies this is perhaps inevitable. By medieval standards the Yorkist court appears reasonably well-documented, but by Tudor standards it is a blank page. When the household, and the broader court of which it was part, was so quintessentially a matter of personal relationships, the historian can only hope to see what was going on if he has access to private, rather than public, evidence, and for the Yorkist period this is still dishearteningly fragmentary. A particular difficulty is that there are no extant Yorkist chamber accounts, and whole areas of royal activity are consequently invisible. Loades considers that Edward IV 'probably came as near as any responsible king of the time could to being indifferent to religion' [p.177]. It is interesting to speculate whether that view would stand if one had the records of the king's casual charitable and religious disbursements which survive for Henry VII. Similarly, Loades suggests that, although the opulence of Edward IV's court was dazzling, it was 'visually unimaginative' [p.21], and this too must in part be regarded as an argument from silence. Henry VII's Privy Purse expenses reveal Jacques Haute as a regular organiser of plays and disguisings [pp.100, 106], but there is no way of knowing whether this was an expertise he had acquired in the service of Edward IV. Whatever the historical justification for treating the Yorkist court as a prelude to the Tudor experience, it inevitably means that the earlier court seems a paler version of its better-documented successor.

What the historian of the Yorkist court does have is the *Black Book* of Edward IV's household, which is probably why Loades chose to start his account in 1461 rather than 1485. The book is, however, an extremely intractable source. As its editor, the late Professor Myers, made clear in his notes to the text, the numbers of servants given by the book, and even the terminology which it employs, do not relate at all clearly to the picture which can be drawn from other, less formal, sources. The *Black Book* cannot, in other words, be taken as a literal picture of the household as it existed at its compilation in c.1471-2, let alone for the reign as a whole. It is significant that David Morgan, who is the contributor most familiar with the Yorkist household, makes less use of the book as evidence of Yorkist practice than either Starkey or Loades.

The *Black Book* is also deceptive in a more general sense. Its language is extremely conservative: something which Dr. Starkey takes at face value and sees as evidence that Edward IV only sought 'to restore and systematize' [p.72]. In medieval sources, however, conscious antiquarianism is generally a smokescreen behind which innovation can occur without criticism, and the *Black Book* is no exception. Although the exact circumstances of its compilation are never explained, the book was almost certainly intended to provide a structure for the expansion of the household in the 1470s which, in effect, absorbed much of the royal affinity. The *Black Book's* category of knights and esquires of the household was an attempt to provide a niche for the king's local retainers who were now entering the household in increasing numbers and whose presence was to give the household of the 1470s and early 1480s a very different 'feel' from the earlier households discussed by Given-Wilson.

The nature of the available sources does not only mean that there are aspects of the Yorkist (and earlier) royal households which are simply invisible. It also imposes a more general restriction on the way in which the subject can be discussed. It is possible, if the *Black Book* is handled carefully, to discuss Edward IV's household in organizational terms. It is, however, very rarely possible to discuss the household in terms of centralized politics. For most of the time the medieval historian cannot see who, at any given moment, was dominating the court or controlling access to the king. Occasionally sources cast a gleam of light on the matter, but this generally has the effect of making the surrounding shadows seem darker. David Morgan, for instance, prints [pp.39-41] an interesting complaint among the early Chancery proceedings which illustrates power broking at Henry VI's court, but which at the same time immediately raises questions about the validity of the familiar assumption that the court in the 1440s was a monolithic structure identifiable with the Suffolk connection.

This imbalance in the evidence means that medieval historians generally find it easier, and more profitable, to discuss the royal household in terms of its impact on local affairs. This is a valid line of approach, not only because most power in the middle ages did sooner or later acquire a local dimension, but because the exercise of regional authority on the king's behalf was always perceived as an essential part of the household's role. There is, however, an obvious danger of under-valuing the simultaneous role of the household at the centre. It was the household which, for most subjects, provided access to the king, and hence to the favour and help which he could offer, and it is possible to find fifteenth-century courtiers whose power at the centre is far greater than one would guess from their local standing. Richard III's chamberlain Francis viscount Lovell is a good example.

This tendency to under-play the medieval household's central role has profound consequences. The better-documented struggles for power within the Tudor court then take on the appearance of a new political departure, and one which can be seen as symptomatic of a shift in power from periphery to centre. On this interpretation, the early modern period saw local landed influence being replaced as the most potent source of political power by an effective presence at court; a view to which both these books appear to subscribe.

Loades presents a dramatic contrast between Edward IV, who failed to establish his dynasty in the face of over-mighty regional forces, and the Tudors who presided over aristocratic contests for influence within the court. Starkey's contributors make the point more obliquely. Only Morgan discusses the extra-curial dimension of power and service. Subsequent chapters are concerned almost exclusively with the court as the cockpit of power. There is very little sense of any regional dimension to that power, whether in the courtier's own right as a local landowner or as an agent of the royal will. Starkey himself does, briefly, address the issue, but only by drawing a surprisingly old-fashioned contrast between the situation in the late middle ages, when 'local government was in the hands of unpaid gentry commissioners' and the situation under Henry VIII when the king sent gentlemen of the Privy Chamber to deal with problems [pp.82-3]. The description of Henrician policy which follows is a precise summary of Yorkist, and earlier, practice.

In the end, therefore, these books beg a question. There is no doubt that Tudor monarchs and their successors liked to see the court as the centre of the political universe, with local affairs an arena for demonstrations of curial authority, rather than *vice versa*. But equally there seems little doubt that much of this was wishful thinking. The inter-relationship of court and regions continued to be a two-way process, as it had always been.

Although one cannot talk of absolute change, it is probable that the early modern period did see some shift of emphasis in favour of the king, with a corresponding decline in the validity of regional power which lacked royal endorsement. Such a trend is already apparent in the fifteenth century. Edward IV's reign, contrary to current thinking, is less an object lesson in the dangers of the over-mighty subject than in the vulnerability of noblemen when the king's favour was withdrawn. But the full story of this development will not be adequately assessed until court and periphery begin to be treated as two partners in a single relationship rather than as opposed forces. David Morgan has recently urged, in a slightly different context, that medievalists whose interests lie in the regions should now consider heading back for the centre.³ If, at the same time, historians of the Tudor court can be persuaded to set off in the opposite direction, and consider the involvement of courtiers at a local level, the results should be, at last, a significant dialogue between late-medieval and early-modern.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *The Royal Household and the King's Affinity: service, politics and finance in England, 1360-1413* (Yale, 1986).
2. David Starkey, 'Which Age of Reform?', in *Revolution Reassessed*, ed. Christopher Coleman and David Starkey (Oxford, 1986).
3. 'The Individual Style of the English Gentleman' in *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in late medieval Europe*, ed. M. Jones (Gloucester, 1986), p.27.