

A CURE FOR THE KING MEANS THE HEALTH OF
THE COUNTRY:

THE MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH OF HENRY VI

WENDY J. TURNER

The limits to which the system of wardship for the mentally incompetent in England could be refined and applied to society at large reached a curious apex in the mid-fifteenth century as the construct of the king's two bodies was played out in the person of King Henry VI. The crown, a corporate entity directed by the king, suddenly had no leader when the king became mentally and physically ill. In many ways the crown had been unable to operate effectively for quite some time before this event, at first because Henry was an infant and later while the king was seemingly in control as an adult. Once the king collapsed, he could not be replaced since he, the corporeal king or body natural, continued to live yet he, the spiritual king or body politic, could not function.¹ The same was true when a king was an infant, and the solution was then simple: provide the child with a guardian to run the country until he came of age or could function on his own.² Yet, a guardian was not provided whenever an adult ruler became ill, and the question became: On what grounds should a mentally incompetent ruler be given a guardian if he could still make decisions some of the time? How long should a council of a king wait to act when a king is ill? And, how drastic should their intervention be?

When a landholder, especially a titled one, became mentally incapacitated, the crown would grant that individual a guardian as soon

¹ For more on the division of the king's two bodies, see: Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957); also see note 9 below.

² Bertram Wolffe, *Henry VI: reader in Medieval History*, English Monarchs (London: Methuen, 1981); Ralph A. Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI: The Exercise of Royal Authority 1422-1461* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981); R. L. Storey, *The End of the House of Lancaster*, 1966 (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1986).

as possible. In the instance of the ill king, the head that wore the crown and held the title of king was the individual who needed a guardian, and the crown as the corporate entity needed to act without its leader to appoint a 'guardian' for the body natural of the king and his political and physical lands—the country. This was a crisis of identity and culture for England's elite. The king's counselors and the Parliament had to find a way to circumvent the spiritual head of England without disturbing the physical position of the king. This chapter outlines how leading magnates used their power to seek assistance for the king and the community, how the concerns of those surrounding the king led to the 'wardship' of the country and to expansive medical assistance for the king, and how one man's mental collapse became the crisis of the polity.

Henry VI's extended family caused much of the economic decline in the fifteenth century by bickering over the crown; the nobility associated this economic downturn of the country with the failing health of the king. Just as the king's body and political person were inseparably linked, many connected the health of the king to the financial and cultural health of the country. What the corporate crown seems to have attempted to do was distance itself from the actual king, the body politic, while still affirming the corporeal king, the body natural. Parliament and the Council looked for answers in a variety of forms including alchemical means, medical practices, economic investments, and internal family lines.

Henry's Personal History

Young Henry VI grew up surrounded by others such as John, the Duke of Bedford, who defended and lost much of Henry's inheritance in France for him. Even on his father's deathbed, who should be in charge of the not-yet-solidified dual country was a controversial issue. Henry's father Henry V died prematurely, before the elderly Charles VI died and relinquished full control of the French crown to the English king. When Charles died many months later, Henry VI's uncle the dauphin disputed the English claim—the infant Henry's claim—to France. For the first seven years of Henry VI's rule as king of England and France, several of his father's advisors and family members formed a protectorate surrounding young Henry: Humphrey, the Duke of Gloucester; Bishop Henry Beaufort; and