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Revision

Henry VII

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Consider the following question on Henry VII, then take a look at the sample student response and the examiner's commentary (in red).

Question

How serious were the problems facing Henry VII after his victory at Bosworth in 1485?

Student answer with commentary

Henry Tudor faced serious problems following his victory over the Yorkist, Richard III, at Bosworth. In particular, his claim to the throne was weak and he had been successful only because of the anti-Richard coalition, which had little in common other than the aim of removing Richard. There were also a number of Yorkists and other nobles, such as the de la Poles, who wanted a Yorkist restoration. The nobility had become accustomed to challenging the monarch, with the succession from Henry IV to Henry V the only one in the previous 100 years that had gone unchallenged. Henry himself was virtually unknown, having been in exile since 1471, and the strength of the monarchy was weak given the poor finances and lack of Crown lands. Such was the weakness of Henry's position that even at the end of his reign, officials reported a conversation at Calais where the succession was discussed and his son's name was not mentioned as the next monarch – a clear indication that the problems he faced in establishing the Tudor dynasty were serious.

This is a very strong opening paragraph. It identifies the range of problems Henry Tudor faced and is able to place events in context.

Henry's claim to the throne was his most serious problem, as it could not be overcome. It was particularly weak, coming as it did through his mother, Margaret Beaufort, who was descended from Edward III's son, John of Gaunt. As a result of the Yorkist victory at Tewkesbury in 1471, Henry Tudor had gone into exile and had no influence on English politics and knew little of the country. It was the death of Edward IV and the usurpation of Richard that reopened the question of who should rule England, giving Henry a potential opportunity. However, it was only victory on the battlefield that gave Henry the crown. It was apparent that he considered this a serious problem – he dated his reign from the day before Bosworth so that he could punish those who had fought against him and seize their estates. Henry's coronation was before both his marriage to Elizabeth of York and the meeting of Parliament, but both were still used to try to bolster his position – further evidence of his weak position.

The paragraph focuses on the issue of Henry's claim and argues that this was the most serious problem, as no matter what actions he took it could not be overcome. Once again, the response shows good contextual knowledge, aware of developments during the reigns of his predecessors, but also showing knowledge of the actions that Henry took to try to lessen the problem.

Despite his victory at Bosworth, Henry was not secure. Bosworth did not signal the end of the Wars of the Roses and, at the time, no one would have known that it was the last serious battle of the conflict. Even then, Henry would face a challenge from the Pretender Lambert Simnel at East Stoke in 1487, which could just as easily have resulted in the defeat of the king, as had happened in 1485. Furthermore, the coalition of forces that had brought Henry to the throne had little in common, and although his army consisted of Lancastrians, such as the Earl of Oxford, and mercenaries provided by France, it also contained anti-Ricardians, who were angered by his seizure of the throne and probable murder of the princes in the tower. It was therefore unlikely that this coalition would hold together, and there was no reason why the Wars of the Roses would not restart.

The response considers the nature of the force that had brought Henry to the throne and why this might be a problem, focusing on their lack of a common aim beyond removing Richard. Perhaps more could have been made of the anti-Richard feeling following his treatment of members of the nobility, but the response does note that East Stoke could just as easily have resulted in another Bosworth.

Although it could be argued that many were fed up with years of conflict and would welcome a ruler who offered stability, the political nation was divided and those who were out of favour were likely to offer their support to anyone who might restore their political fortune. Conflict had become a way of life for many in the second half of the fifteenth century. However, Henry's position might appear more secure, as many Yorkists had been killed in the Wars of The Roses, but there were still many alive with a good claim to the throne – at least as good as Henry's. This was seen within the first year, with Lovell and Stafford rising, but they were still a threat until 1506 when Philip of Burgundy handed over the Earl of Suffolk. Even without 'legitimate' claimants there was the threat from Yorkist pretenders, with Simnel forcing Henry into battle and the Warbeck saga lasting from 1491 to 1499. This added further weight to the seriousness of the problems facing Henry, given Yorkist support from Richard's sister, Margaret of Burgundy.

The Yorkist threat is further developed and although the focus of the essay is on the early years and problems, the response uses later events to support the argument and show just how serious the problems were that Henry faced. Once again there is a wide range of supporting material across the period, with mention of Lovell, Stafford and Suffolk. The discussion is balanced, with the opening sentence offering an alternative view, which is then taken apart to argue the issue was serious. The final sentence links the material back to the actual question of how serious Henry's problems were.

Although many members of the nobility – particularly southerners disillusioned by Richard's 'plantation policy' – were anti-Richard, it did not mean that they would give their unequivocal support to Henry. There were also those who had done well out of the Ricardian regime and could provide the leadership needed to overthrow Henry. It is apparent that Henry saw them as a serious threat as his measures against them, notably Bonds and Recognisances and Acts of Attainder, demonstrate. However, he also realised that he would need to win them over and was willing to give many a second chance to prove their loyalty, even if they had fought for Richard. For example, the Duke of Northumberland was quickly released from jail and given back his old position to govern the north. Henry took a strong line over retainers and limited the numbers who could keep an armed retinue, allowing them to grow only when he could be sure of their loyalty. This suggests that he considered them a serious problem.

There is again a balanced discussion of the nobility with a range of measures taken against them considered and a precise example used to support the argument. The material is clearly linked back to the question.

The Crown was financially weak. Much Crown land had been alienated at a time when land equalled power. It was apparent that Henry also saw this as a serious problem, as an Act of Resumption was passed in 1486 which recovered all Crown land given away since 1455. Henry also used financial penalties against the nobility, not only to reduce their power, but to boost Crown finances. Attempts to raise taxation created further problems, as could be seen with the Yorkshire and Cornish tax rebellions, the latter of which could have been a bigger threat if it had joined with Warbeck. However, this was the least serious of Henry's problems as he was able to overcome the Crown's financial weakness and died solvent.

The range of material used continues to be impressive and the response makes a valid point that, in overcoming the problem, it was the least serious issue.

Henry's problems in 1485 were serious and it was only in the latter years of his reign that he could feel secure. The benefit of hindsight suggests he was never seriously challenged, but at the time no one could be certain that the Wars of the Roses had ended and that East Stoke would be the last serious military challenge. Henry was concerned about the security of his throne for most of his reign – largely the result of his weak claim and having seized the throne by force – suggesting that if he could, so could others, particularly if they could secure foreign support. It was a problem that could not be solved, despite this measure, unlike that of finance.

The conclusion reaches a judgement, which follows on from the opening paragraph and line of argument pursued throughout the response. The answer has focused on the seriousness of the problems Henry faced in 1485, as required by the question, and has not drifted into long explanations of the threat posed by, for example, Pretender rebellions. When they are referenced they are used to address the actual question set. There are some interim judgements about the seriousness of the issues, and the argument is supported throughout by detailed knowledge.

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