

TOURNAMENTS AT THE COURT OF KING HENRY VIII

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King Henry VIII was a good all-round sportsman. He held many tournaments, undoubtedly to a large extent simply because he liked them. However tournaments were not just good sporting occasions: they had political importance and above all were splendid opportunities to impress foreign ambassadors who were likely to write glowing reports of the King's evident wealth and power.¹ This was an important consideration. Henry was playing a political game in Europe against opponents with greater resources. He was also displaying his physical dominance. The combats showed a physically powerful man; the pageantry projected an image of a politically powerful potentate.

The impersonation of allegorical roles was a major feature of the Tudor tournament. The costumes were also often likened to the allegorical framework within which many jousts were set, presenting the jousts as the knights-errant of medieval romantic fiction and the tournament as the response to an heroic challenge.

The Westminster Tournament was held on 12 and 13 February in 1511. The tournament celebrated the birth of a short-lived son to Henry VIII. The event was recorded for posterity in the vast illuminated vellum roll preserved at the College of Arms.² The four main jousts at this tournament all adopted chivalric names:

Henry VIII: *Noble Cueur Loyal*

Lord Devon (Courtenay): *Bon Vouloir*

Sir Thomas Knyvet: *Vaillant Desyr*

Edward Neville: *Joyeux Penser*

The names were derived from the greatest love allegory of the Middle Ages, the *Roman de la Rose*, and they personify the psychological forces in the conquest of love. The elaborate pageantry and allegory shows the influence of the Burgundian court. This habit of externalising qualities and making them visible was important to the court society.

The manuscript only shows the second day of the tournament. However, the results of the first day of jousts at the Westminster Tournament are known through a herald's score sheet, or cheque, preserved in the Bodleian Library, Oxford (Ashmolean MS 1116) which shows that Cueur Loyal (Henry VIII) performed best.

A score cheque of very similar form, for a tournament staged by Henry at Greenwich in 1516, preserved in the archives of the College of Arms (cat. no. 11), illustrates the system of scoring which had become accepted by this date, with columns listing the names of the 'challengers' and 'defenders', and next to each name a rectangular box, marks upon which recorded the individual outcome of each joust. A mark on one part of a line would indicate a strike to the head of an opponent, on another to the body, while another type of mark would indicate a lance successfully broken.

Of Henry's other tournaments, three are noteworthy. A typical tournament was that held in 1517 when Henry VIII held 'costly *Justes*' at Greenwich for the 'solace' of the ambassadors at his court. The whole event was meant to be awe-inspiring. The chronicler Edward Hall described the tournament.³ Most of Hall's description was concerned with the triumphal entry of King Henry followed by a brief but laudatory description of the actual tilting. The King, gorgeously dressed, headed the procession with his band of eleven challengers and was followed by no less than 125 attendants. Charles Brandon, the Duke of Suffolk, with his band of eleven answerers brought up the rear. The origins of this type of procession came from the Middle Ages and continued on through the Renaissance and into the Baroque period. It refers back to a ruler formally taking possession of a city, making a solemn entrance. This medieval theme was reinforced in the Renaissance with the concept of a Roman triumph. This is exactly how the chronicler Edward Hall saw the tournament of 1517, for he continues; '*after this great triumphe, the king appointed his gestes for his pastime this sommer...*'

Large crowds watched Henry fight and they must have been impressed both by the King's prowess and by the evident wealth, splendour and, by implication, power of the monarchy. Hall certainly was, for his chronicle, first printed in 1548, dwelt on Henry's tournaments in awe-struck detail at the expense of perhaps more significant aspects of his reign. Foreign ambassadors were also impressed, and many of Henry's tournaments were specially arranged for diplomatic purposes, like those held at Greenwich in 1517 and 1527.

The greatest example of tiltyard diplomacy came at the Field of Cloth of Gold in 1520, where more than 150 French and English courtiers, including Henry VIII and Francis I, jostled, tourneyed and fought, on foot on and off for eleven days.⁴ The Field of Cloth of Gold was named after the magnificent (and very costly) cloth of gold pavilions embellishing an otherwise drab setting in the Pale of Calais. The 'field' was one of the most extraordinary paradoxes of the period. Even today it is a byword for chivalry and extravagance.

The lists, the area to contain the event, were about 275 metres by 98 metres (900x320 feet) and surrounded by a ditch. Around the field were stands for spectators, tents for each king and a triumphal arch at each end. But it was the 'tree of honour' that excited the most contemporary comment, for it epitomised the chivalrous nature of the tournament. An artificial hawthorn tree and a raspberry bush were entwined to form the tree. The hawthorn was symbolic of Henry and the raspberry of Francis. It was on this tree that the challengers hung their shields in the traditional way to declare their intention to take part.

The three main forms of combat were the tilt, the tourney and the foot combat at the barrier. Other sports took place during inclement weather. On one such day there was wrestling and archery. Henry had great success with the bow, while Francis took little or no part in the archery. Afterwards, Henry, rather surprisingly, challenged Francis himself to a wrestling match, but he was quickly thrown by the French king and suffered a subsequent loss of face. The challenge was surprising, as the carefully planned rules of the tournament had agreed that the two kings would fight as brothers-in-arms. As 'brothers' they would not actually fight one another and so would avoid the embarrassment of a defeat.

Tilting was the predominant form of combat, lasting over a week. The object of the course was to break a lance on an opponent, and for this purpose rebated (blunted) lances were used. This did not, however, prevent injury; one French knight died tilting against his brother. Each day's events were formalised according to chivalric ideals. The queens and spectators arrived and were seated, then a knight entered with a band of about ten men as challengers. They paraded around the lists and gave reverence to the queens. The answerers entered and did likewise. The individual jousts then began, with heralds and judges keeping order. The two kings took a full and active part in the tilting, breaking many lances. On one occasion, Francis is said to have received a black

eye.

The tourney and tourney course followed the tilt and lasted two days. The tourney was a contest between two groups of mounted combatants who normally first charged with lances and then fought with swords. According to Edward Hall however, the combatants at the Field of Cloth of Gold only fought with swords. The two kings also fought a tourney course between two single contestants. It was in this combat that Henry VIII encountered Robert III de la Marck, Seigneur de Fleuranges. Henry drove him back and disarmed him, breaking a pauldron. In the Musée de l'Armée, Paris is an armour made in Henry's workshop at Greenwich, which according to a tradition already current in the 17th century, belonged to Fleuranges (Musée de l'Armée, G46, H57) (cat. no. 24).⁵ It is datable to about 1525 as it was possibly given by King Henry to Fleuranges in recompense.

The pageantry of the tournament was augmented by magnificent banquets and masked balls, with much music and dancing. Each Sunday was devoted to such festivities. At the Field of Cloth of Gold, as on many other occasions, the combats were part of a wide range of revels which included feasting, pageants, plays and masques. The courtiers who danced in the masques were often the same men who had earlier competed in the tiltyard, and the King was frequently among them.

Edward Hall describes the concluding pageantry of the tournament: *After this challenge honourably performed, the Kynges prepared divers maskers, and especially of the King of England....*⁶ There was a stunning display of elaborately dressed men representing various heroes of the past, both historical and mythological.

A tournament was held in 1527 to impress the French in the guise of the French ambassador, François de la Tour d'Auvergne, Vicomte de Turenne.⁷ In May, a 'Peace and League' was concluded between France and England. This was followed by magnificent celebrations, which included a tournament, a play, a banquet and a masked ball.

The tournaments of Henry VIII were not just good spectator sports: they gave Henry a chance to show off what he excelled at, to appear physically and politically powerful and all within a complex allegory, seen not only in the combats themselves but in the wider aspects of the tournament pageantry.

NOTES

1. Anglo 1969
 2. The manuscript is endorsed: 'Justes at Westminster the 12th of February by the King, my Lord Devon, sir Thomas Knyvet and Edward Nevill, A.1.H.VII.' The format of this manuscript is extremely unusual: it is a long continuous roll, rather than a book. The roll shows three separate scenes from the tournament.
 - A. (membranes 2–23) the entry into the lists of a procession including the four Knight Challengers
 - B. (membranes 24–27) a view of the tilt itself, with the Challengers at one end the Answerers at the other, and the King tilting against an Answerer watched by the Queen, with ladies and gentlemen of the court in an ornate gallery.
 - C. (membranes 27–35) a procession returning from the lists after the day's tilting
- A collotype reproduction of the manuscript, *The Great Tournament Roll of Westminster*, Oxford, 1968, with an excellent historical introduction by Sydney Anglo.
3. Hall 1904 Vol. I: 164–5
 4. Hall 1904 Vol. I: 189–218; Groubaux & Lemoisure 1913
 5. Blair 1959: 17–20
 6. Hall 1904 Vol. I: 215–16
 7. Hall 1904 Vol. II: 83–88

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