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Prologue

From 1963 to 2001

What has happened to the themes of this book since 1963, when it was first published? Much every way: for there have been new editions of sources, new interpretations of vital texts and a host of books and articles on almost every corner of the subject. The bibliography at the end contains only a tiny number of books and editions already published in 1963. This means that a far deeper understanding of the kingship, queenship and the political history of England has been furnished by the scholarship of the last forty years.

Deeper, yet not in all respects different. The main sources remain as they were: the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Asser's *Life of Alfred*, the biographies and chronicles of the eleventh and twelfth centuries still hold sway, most of them in new and better editions. The authenticity of Asser has been vindicated and challenged again; I assume that the general consensus is, with good reason, in its favour. *Beowulf* is still the central heroic lay of the Anglo-Saxon era. Only here, further discussion and deeper research has had the paradoxical result that we know less, not more about the poem![1] A sensitive interpretation will still see it as the work of a Christian author reflecting on a pagan past, and in the current state of knowledge, the arguments in favour of an eighth-century date seem likely to prevail; but all that is certainly agreed is that the manuscript in which it survives cannot be later than the mid-eleventh century (many would say, than about 1000), and the poem could conceivably be as late as the tenth century. In that case the poet shows the kind of imaginative insight into the

1 The various dates suggested for the poem and the MS in which it is preserved are summarized by George Jack and Donald Scragg in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, pp. 62–3. Kiernan 1984 argued for a mid-eleventh-century date for both; Lapidge 2000 has restored the poem to the early eighth century.

nature of the pagan world shown by Shakespeare in King Lear – though I do not myself believe in the attempt to find a Christian mythology in that great and terrible work. But the author of *Beowulf* in any case had access to paganism still in the Scandinavian world he so lavishly describes. On this theme I have left my text little altered; for who knows where the criticism of *Beowulf* will have led us forty years hence?[2] Where recent research has altered or undermined the views expressed in 1963, I have made such adjustments as seemed needed. Some of my interpretations have been proved simply wrong: my account of the death of William Rufus has been revised to allow for the strong arguments deployed by the late Warren Hollister that it was accident not murder.[3] I had suggested that there was possible evidence of conspiracy; but this Hollister dissolved. It depended on the assumption that Walter Tirel fired the fatal arrow, and that his relations were richly rewarded; but Tirel himself denied the charge (as I admitted in 1963); he personally did not benefit; and the rewards of his relations were not all that remarkable. Accident it probably was; but we do well to reflect the staggering comment of William of Malmesbury – in most respects a warm admirer of Henry I – on the fate of Henry's eldest brother, Robert Curthose. Robert was captured after the battle of Tinchebrai in 1106 and kept in 'open confinement' until his death in 1134. 'It was owing to the praiseworthy *pietas*[4] of his brother that he suffered nothing beyond solitude.'[5] Kings being what they are, to sentence one's brother to life imprisonment is 'praiseworthy'; one might reasonably expect sentence of death . . .

I wrote in 1963 from the sources, and they are still in the main as they were then – though many have taken on a new lease of life in modern editions. I particularly note two crucial sources of which we know far more in 2001 than we did in 1963, each in a very different way outstanding examples of historical detective work: Martin Carver's campaign at Sutton Hoo, and the numerous attempts to reinterpret the Bayeux Tapestry.

2 For another case in which we know less in 2001 than we thought we knew in 1963, see p. 77 on the kingdom of Lindsey. A more doubtful example is the poem on Athelstan embedded in the text of William of Malmesbury: see p. 113.

3 Hollister 1986 (first published in 1973). He also argues (p. 66 n. 2) that because the arrangement between Robert and William by which each should succeed the other had broken down at an early date, Henry's chance of the throne was not so dependent on Robert's absence on crusade as I had argued. I am not so sure: in 1100 Robert certainly still thought he should succeed.

4 'Sense of duty' (Winterbottom) is very probably the best translation; 'family feeling' is possible – brotherly love would be a mockery.

5 William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum*, I, 706–7.

Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo, opened in 1939, turned upside down our understanding of England – and Europe too – in the seventh century. But it was a document without context: no modern, scientific investigation of the other mounds had taken place, and it was as if a single item from a rich archive had been extracted, published, and studied – and yet no one had looked at the rest of the archive from which it came. Much was done by Rupert Bruce-Mitford and others to reinterpret the discoveries of 1939; and the numismatists meanwhile redated the coins to suggest a burial date of *c.*625 rather than *c.*655.[6] At last, between 1983 and 1997, under the direction of Professor Martin Carver, with the support of the Society of Antiquaries, the British Museum, and other bodies, a major campaign of archaeological research was mounted on the site.[7] This involved research in many disciplines, and extensive study of the wider context throughout Suffolk, England and north-western Europe in the early Middle Ages. In accordance with the rules of research archaeology, something was left for future generations, with yet more advanced techniques, to investigate. But nearly a quarter of the site was uncovered, and the whole surveyed, and we now know most of what it has to tell us. It was clearly a cemetery dedicated to kings or great nobles; the manner of burial and some of the grave goods show a close link with Scandinavia; the coins and other elements show some relationship to the kingdoms of the Franks – and some of the objects came from Byzantium. It is most naturally explained as the cemetery of a pagan royal family – though baptismal spoons among the grave goods in Mound 1 hint at a Christian influence beginning to make its way. This has long seemed to fit Rædwald (died *c.*625 – more precisely, between 616 and 627), who raised Christian and pagan altars in the same temple;[8] and conversion to Christianity would naturally (in the conditions of the age) bring to a close both cremations and the accumulation of treasures for the afterlife. East Anglia seems to have had a pagan royal house for less than a hundred years, from the late sixth to the mid-seventh century. Martin Carver's conclusion is admirably cautious: 'Although the association of Sutton Hoo and the short-lived pagan royal house of East Anglia has not been proved, there are still sufficient grounds for believing it.'[9]

The interpretation of the Bayeux Tapestry was and is of exceptional importance for my account of king-making. I had had the good fortune well before 1963 of advice on this from the late Harold Walker – to

6 Bruce-Mitford 1975–83; cf. Carver 1998, pp. 34–5.

7 See p. x. There is an admirable summary in Carver 1998; we await the full report due shortly in Carver and Hummler, forthcoming.

8 See p. 47; for his dates, see S. Keynes in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, p. 508.

9 Carver 1998, pp. 172–3.

whom the book is dedicated – and I regard the article by Nicholas Brooks enshrining his own and Walker's views (published in 1979) as fundamental. The essence of the matter is that it was the creation of an English designer and craftsmen (probably craftswomen) working for a Norman patron, Odo, bishop of Bayeux and earl of Kent.[10] Recent work has suggested links with Canterbury, specifically with St Augustine's Abbey.[11] An attempt has since been made to argue that it was Norman work; and it is notoriously difficult wholly to distinguish English and Norman styles in this period.[12] But the attempt founders. First of all, the spelling of personal and place-names is palpably English – even the Norman Bayeux comes out as *Bagias*, a natural way for an English author to render the sound of 'ai' or 'ay': in all the Norman texts of the period which I have seen the spelling is a variant of *Baioce* or *Baiocum*. Equally striking is the ambiguity, or ambivalence, of the story it tells. In none of the recent discussions I have read is this sufficiently emphasized. The brilliantly vivid pictorial narrative has its own Latin commentary above; and at several crucial points the Latin fails to tell us what is happening. It opens with Harold consulting Edward the Confessor before setting off for Normandy – no explanation is given. The other sources are divided as to whether Harold was sent by Edward or went on his own initiative. When Harold swears his oath to William we are not told what the oath was about – even though it was central to the narrative and clearly of great importance. Most remarkable of all is the vital scene in which Edward the Confessor lies on his deathbed. It is argued below (p. 28) that the scene of his burial here precedes his death (a reversal of the order of the narrative unique in the Tapestry) precisely to ensure that a direct connection can be made between Edward's last moment and the offer of the crown to Harold. To the right a man makes the offer, and his hand meanwhile is pointing to the previous scene. The Latin here is at its most gnomic: 'Here King Edward on his [death]bed addresses his faithful men' – and below, more lucidly – 'And here he is dead'. The king addressed his faithful followers. As C. H. Dodd said of the crucial meeting of St Paul

10 The highly professional knowledge the designer reveals of the possibilities of embroidery as a craft in the service of vivid historical narrative may suggest that it was designed by a woman. We have no means of being sure, but for convenience I refer to the designer as 'she'.

11 Richard Gameson in Gameson 1997, pp. 171–3 – leaving open whether the designer was a monk or a secular artist. Elsewhere Gameson emphasizes the religious inspiration of the Tapestry – against C.R. Dodwell, who in a brilliant article reprinted ibid., ch. 7, had emphasized the secular elements, especially in the links with secular epics. For other recent studies by art historians, see the essays by G.R. Owen-Crocker and Peter Lasko in Owen-Crocker and Graham 1998.

12 Grape 1994, on which see Gameson in Gameson 1997, pp. 162–74.

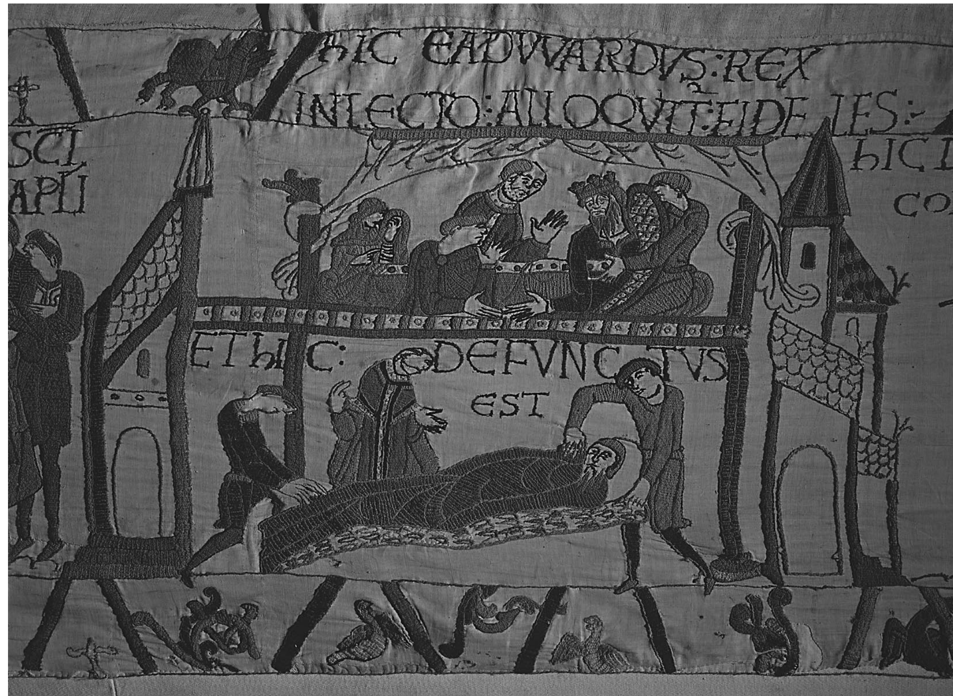

Plate 1 The death of Edward the Confessor from the Bayeux Tapestry. Edward's death is the centre of a long tableau: to the left he is carried to Westminster Abbey for burial; to the right the crown is offered to Harold, and beyond is Harold's coronation. By twisting the story in this way the deathbed and the offer to Harold are brought close together: the man offering the crown to Harold whose finger is just visible points both to Edward's dying speech and to his death. See p. 4.

with St Peter in Jerusalem: 'we may presume they did not spend all the time talking about the weather'.[13] Basically, the Norman case was that Edward had designated William; Harold's case was that on his deathbed Edward designated him. The Tapestry avoids discussing William's designation by starting after it can have happened (if it did), and by making no reference in the Latin inscriptions to any message Harold may have taken to Duke William. An English observer contemplating the scene of Edward's death would naturally take it for granted that Edward was designating Harold. But the Latin does not say so – it is clearly and deliberately vague. As we have seen, strong grounds have been found for connecting the design of the Tapestry to Canterbury; and it is striking that its story is closest to that told by the Canterbury monk Eadmer, who was a boy in Canterbury at the time of the Conquest.[14] Eadmer makes Harold go to Normandy to release two relations who were hostages in William's power. There is no sign of the hostages in the Tapestry, which has Harold in the Conqueror's presence pointing towards the next, mysterious scene in which a clerk seems to be raping a nun called Ælfgyva. The natural interpretation is that Harold's visit was connected with her story, and that she was also related to him – or so it was believed in late eleventh-century Canterbury. There is no other trace of her. But the rest of the Tapestry's story, with Harold's oath to William and Edward's subsequent designation of Harold before his death, is strikingly similar to Eadmer's; and we may be reasonably confident that the designer of the Tapestry knew a Canterbury version of the events similar to Eadmer's, and was sufficiently confident of her view of the matter to preserve it in her portrayal of the Conquest – while avoiding any explicit statements which might not appeal to her patron, the Conqueror's half-brother. Historians are inclined to assume that patrons could dictate to artists how their commissions were portrayed; but artists have often had their own views. The designer of the Bayeux Tapestry was a great artist: she (or he) has sometimes been denied her full stature since so little survives with which to compare the work. It seems to me abundantly clear that the Tapestry portrays events in a manner acceptable both to an English and a Norman audience;[15] and that this was achieved by careful

13 Dodd 1944, p. 16.

14 Eadmer, *Historia Novorum*, pp. 6–9.

15 I make – as most historians do – too clear-cut a distinction between the English and Norman points of views. Thus Eadmer and the Tapestry have much in common with the fullest Norman account by William of Poitiers; so much so that William has been supposed to be their main source. This I find difficult to believe, but the ambiguities of the Tapestry are eloquent testimony to as lively a debate on the events of 1066 in the late eleventh century as in the early twenty-first.

reticence in the inscriptions. 'Great are thy powers, O silence', said Trollope's Miss Dunstable, quoting Carlyle.[16] We cannot tell what really happened. There are three versions of the designation of William – one when Edward was still an exile, the second in 1051, when Robert of Jumiéges, archbishop of Canterbury, is said to have carried the nomination to William when he was on his way to Rome, the third, also in 1051, when William is alleged to have visited Edward. In some sense or measure, all three may be true; but that does not diminish the probability that Edward designated Harold on his deathbed. However that may be, there is no doubt that the Tapestry still has secrets to reveal.

Thus the Tapestry emphasizes the links of England and the continent in art as well as politics. Some historians lay more, some less stress on the European context of the institutions of monarchy in pre- and post-Conquest England; I remain an unrepentant European. Janet Nelson's brilliant studies of coronation rites have shown how intimate the relations of English and Frankish practices were already in the ninth century – when English books could influence the Franks, and vice versa;[17] and we may suppose that these links in fact went further back still, to the days when Offa of Mercia had his son anointed king in 787, six years after the pope had anointed two Frankish princes, thirty-six after the anointing of Pippin as king of the Franks, the formal inauguration of the Carolingian dynasty. Other similar links can be observed from time to time throughout the period. Otto the Great's imperial coronation took place in 962, Edgar's in 973 (see p. 33). Cnut's pilgrimage to Rome in 1027, culminating in his meeting with pope and emperor, was an important step in the legitimation of his rule. The earliest surviving great seal, that of Edward the Confessor, is a close imitation of that of the Emperor Conrad II. In 1963 already I pointed out links with the Spanish monarchy (see p. 155). The catalogue could be extended.

It is true that George Garnett, in a fascinating article, has argued that English customs were in some respects in contrast to those in France and Germany – and that the Conqueror brought continental ideas with him in 1066.[18] I am sure that he has put his finger correctly

16 *Framley Parsonage*, ch. 48. For what follows (Edward's designation of William), the best authorities are: for the period of exile, Eadmer, *Historia Novorum*, p. 7; for 1051, via Robert of Jumièges, William of Poitiers, pp. 20–1, and William of Jumièges, II, 158–9; for the visit of William, *ASC* D, trans. Garmonsway, p. 176. The *ASC* does not mention designation, and has been often doubted; but if Robert did carry such a message earlier in 1051, a visit by William to Edward seems a very likely consequence.

17 Nelson 1986, chs. 11–17.

18 Garnett 1986.

on some local customs. But all the processes of king-making have to be seen in the political context of their day. The practice of associating the king's son with his father by anointing and coronation was innovative in 787 – but not practised again in England till 1170. The French and German precedents were not all encouraging; and the English kings might take warning as probably as being inspired by the model: it could only work if there was genuine affection or at least a convincing show of obedience on the part of the son – a show which quite often proved illusory. Again, it is notorious that Alfred succeeded though his elder brothers had left sons who might have reckoned, in Hamlet's words, that Alfred had 'popp'd in between the election and my hopes': the urgency of the Viking attacks probably determined the issue in this case, though we may allow something for Alfred's ambition. Garnett observed that late Old English coronations commonly took place some time after the new king's accession. In contrast, the Norman kings were anointed and crowned at the earliest opportunity. But in this they simply followed the example of Harold, who doubtless himself sought every means of propping up a doubtful claim that the Church's rites could give. By the same token William (however he might protest to the contrary) was a usurper; William II and Henry I both had an elder brother with a colourable claim to succeed before them; Stephen was in many folk's eyes a usurper; Henry II had to secure an inheritance based on a possibly shaky treaty with his predecessor. If we look for an innovator, it was not the Norman William, but the English Harold. Yet this is to take a superficial view of the case: throughout the history of monarchy in England, local custom has been adapted to political circumstance, English traditions to the views of a monarchy with its eyes on Europe at large: the monarchs of Europe could seek the customs of their caste in the recesses of a large room. This is particularly clear if we observe the contrast between the strength of local feeling which bound the English people, the *gens Anglorum*, and the complex of local and Europe-wide models and ambitions which inspired the kings of the English.

The English People and the English Kings

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that this book is a history of the English kings and queens down to 1154, not of the English people. The difference is fundamental. There were kings, but not kings of England or the English, in the sixth and seventh centuries already; the title 'king of the English' is of the tenth century. But already in the

590s Pope Gregory I was talking about 'the English people' – *gens Anglorum*;[19] and the phrase so appealed to the Venerable Bede that in the 730s he immortalized it in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. It is not quite clear how Gregory came by the notion – he is commonly believed to have invented it; and it has often been thought to fit uncomfortably with Bede's famous description of how the Anglo-Saxon invaders comprised Angles and Saxons and Jutes.[20] Why have they all been compressed into 'the Angles' or 'the English'? It might be easier to answer the question if we knew more of the origins and nature of the invasions. But in truth, after generations of close research, we know very little of the matter. That Saxony and Jutland were important sources of the invaders of the fifth and sixth centuries need not be doubted; though Pope Gregory's own belief that the Angles came from the angle between Denmark and Germany is not quite so easily credited. What seems certain is that both Gregory's belief that they were all Angles – expressed in the early and well-recorded legend that he hoped they might (if duly converted) become angels – and Bede's that they belonged to three clearly defined tribes, are very doubtful.[21] In later times, local groups and peoples were given titles like 'West Saxon'; but the kings of the West Saxons succeeded kings of quite a different region and tribe, the 'Gewissae', who occupied a rather different area in the west country.[22] There is undoubtedly an element of later rationalization in all these schemes. However much truth may lie in some of them, far the earliest recorded is Pope Gregory's reference to the English people. But Pope Gregory lived in Rome, and may have known little about this island: when he chose York and London as the centres of his archbishoprics (which in fact became centred in York and Canterbury until the southern archbishop moved to Lambeth in the twelfth century), he showed more knowledge of the geography of the Roman provinces than of contemporary kingdoms.

What is certain is that the ruling elites of most of what we call England from the sixth century on were pagan and spoke dialects of

19 Bede i.27, 32, pp. 88–9, 110–11 (and cf. ii.2, pp. 132–5) – Gregory also refers to *Angli* and *Anglorum ecclesia*. It is true that Gregory addressed Ethelbert, king of Kent as *regi Anglorum* (Bede i.32, pp. 110–11) and Bede himself refers to Aldfrith of Northumbria as *regem Anglorum* (v.15, pp. 506–7) – but these are abnormal usages before the tenth century. Cf. Sarah Foot in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, pp. 170–1 and refs., who is clear that *gens Anglorum* was coined by Gregory. Maybe: I do not think we can be sure of it; but his use of the phrase was crucial to its later use.

20 Bede i. 15, pp. 50–1 – inspiring a 'vast archaeological debate' (Wormald 1983, p. 100). See also the essays in Bassett 1989.

21 For the legend of Gregory and the Angles, see Bede ii.2, pp. 132–5, and refs.

22 Walker 1956.

a Germanic language with links on the coasts of the Low Countries and Germany but surprisingly few Celtic loan words. Religion and language suggest little contact between native British and the Anglo-Saxon invader; whereas common sense, archaeology and the political history of the peoples suggest that there was constant interchange. There is thus no reliable information on the genetic mixture from which the modern English are derived – only a series of fascinating puzzles.[23] None the less, it was clearly possible for an intelligent foreigner in the sixth century and an exceptionally well-informed Englishman of the seventh and eighth to believe in the existence of 'the English people'.

At first sight it may seem surprising that this ethnic unit (as it was perceived to be) had to wait over three hundred years for political expression. But such seems to have been the case: when an English king achieved such power as to be reckoned overlord of several kingdoms he was called not king of the English but *bretwalda*. Now we do not know for sure what the phrase meant: it is likely that it implied some sort of hegemony in Britain (see p. 80); it cannot possibly have implied any special rule in Angel-land, 'England'. It was only after the Viking invasions, and the union of the non-Viking areas of England by Alfred and his dynasty, that the concept of an English *kingdom* found fortune (see chapters 9–10).

In truth, this separation of people and kingdom need not surprise us: it is only a remarkably dramatic example of a common experience. Kings and queens were dynasts, members of an international caste, set (in some senses) above the petty nationalisms of regions and peoples. Soon after the end of our period, King Richard I reigned for ten years as king of England, spending only a few months in his kingdom. He was much more at home in the large areas of France he also ruled; he married a princess from Navarre in northern Spain; he went on Crusade, settling the affairs of the kingdoms of Sicily, Jerusalem (after a fashion) and Cyprus before returning to England – only very briefly – in 1194. This was a cosmopolitan age in which those who had stomach for it travelled far. But it was also an age which saw the intensifying of many local loyalties – when Welsh and Scottish loyalties found new expression, as Rees Davies has taught us, when the descendants of the Norman conquerors called themselves Englishmen.[24] It was possible for a king to

23 On attempts to align genetic and linguistic evidence, see the penetrating comments in Sims-Williams 1998.
24 Davies 1994–7.

find and harness local loyalties; and the English people had, after all, existed in some senses for centuries longer than the king of the English.

The full ambivalence of these divergent sentiments is brought out by Shakespeare most forcefully in *Henry V.* A king pursuing a purely private and dynastic quarrel – an English king claiming to be king of France as well – precipitates a war which means some loss of life to his own people, immense destruction to the French. On the other hand, it is in some ways a heroic epic. A small English army wins a glorious victory over the French. There are moments of patriotic rhetoric, as in the siege of Harfleur:

> Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,
> Or close the wall up with our English dead! (3.1.1–2)

and many more during the battle of Agincourt. The chorus emphasizes the drama and, in the end, the triumph, in a manner curiously at variance with the mood of much of the play. For from the start the purely dynastic nature of Henry's claim to the French throne is strongly emphasized. The archbishop of Canterbury gives a pedantic account of the case, whose very pedantry underlines how far removed the issue is from the normal interests and concerns of the French and English peoples – and then urges Henry to war. The French dauphin sends Henry a set of tennis balls as a parody of a challenge, and this helps to make the quarrel personal and petty. The rhetoric at the siege of Harfleur is immediately followed by Bardolph's skit on it, and the comic and the sordid sides of warfare are laid bare. Some of the finest poetry in the play is reserved for the duke of Burgundy in the final act: he attempts to make peace between the kings by a brilliant evocation of a French countryside destroyed by war.

> The darnel, hemlock and rank fumitory
> Doth root upon, while that the coulter rusts
> That should deracinate such savagery. (5.2.45–7)

The images of hemlock, rust and savagery recall us to the nature of war. Most of all, the ambivalence comes out in Henry's wandering by night incognito among the English tents before the battle. Every variety of viewpoint is offered him, each more unwelcome than the one before. The common soldiers lay the responsibility for their fate securely on the king:

> Upon the king! . . .
> We must bear all.
> O hard condition, twin-born with greatness . . . (4.1.203–6)

but also, as the audience well knows, of his own making. The dilemma is most brilliantly and forcefully presented: Henry is the English king enrolled with his people under the banner of St George; but he is also a dynast with a doubtful claim to a foreign throne and a petty quarrel with the rival heir. Thus Shakespeare seems to invite us to view a king sometimes as the central, symbolic figurehead of a people – but sometimes as one of an international caste with interests quite separate – quite alien even – to those of his subjects.

The early Anglo-Saxon kings lorded it over a variety of peoples and regions. Only in the tenth and eleventh centuries did they fully and effectively climb on the bandwagon of the *gens Anglorum*, and come to bear the title of *rex Anglorum* – king of the English. Thus this book is not a history of the English people, but of the dynasties which happened to rule them.