

Espionage and Intelligence from the Wars of the Roses to the Reformation

In the period between the Wars of the Roses and the Reformation spies were used in foreign and military affairs and for reasons of domestic security.* Contrary to expectations spies are not difficult to locate or document. They were a feature of classical and ancient civilisations; and the Middle Ages, which drew inspiration from the classical world, followed its example. Classical histories, the study of which was part of a prince's education, contain examples of espionage. The works of Jean de Bueil (d. 1477) and Robert de Balsac (1502), present in the Royal library, prescribed the use of spies. Christine de Pisan, synthesiser of contemporary military practice and the Vegetian canon, was translated into English and published in 1492 on the orders of Henry VII.¹ The literature of the period suggests that spies were an everyday part of military life. Blind Hary's *Wallace*, written in 1478, describes two spies being sent out at midnight to reconnoitre a castle. The chronicles of the period deal with espionage in a matter of fact way, presenting it with little or no comment, except where there was a contemporary controversy. Polydore Vergil spent several paragraphs dismissing the notion that 'as some people think' Sir Robert Clifford and Sir Robert Curzon were spies of Henry VII.² Letters of the period also evidence the work of spies. Royal accounts state openly that rewards were given for spying or in the circumnambulation of the time state that such and such an individual was 'about the king's business'.

It was Philippe de Commynes who made the classic pronouncement that messenger, spy and diplomat amount to the same thing. Ambassadors from friendly princes were to be suspected because 'friendship among princes does not endure forever'. Ambassadors from enemies were to be watched lest they stir up trouble, given an audience and sent quickly out of the kingdom. Commynes was repeating, verbatim, Louis XI who complained that the Milanese ambassador resident in France in the 1470s inhibited his freedom of action in diplomacy.³ Theorists of diplomacy disagreed with Commynes. From the 1430s onwards

* The following must be thanked for encouraging me to write this article; De Lloyd John Guth, Nadia Dobson, the Nottinghamshire branch of the Richard III Society and Michael Jones of Nottingham University.

¹ P. Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 120, 226; *The Book of Fayttes of Armes and Chyualrye*, ed. A. T. P. Byles, EETS Original Series, clxxxix (1932), 291-2; H. Omont, 'Les manuscrits français des rois d'Angleterre', *Etudes romanes dédiées à Gaston Paris* (Paris, 1891), pp. 5-12.

² *Vita Nobilissimi Defensoris Scotie Wilelmi Wallace Militis*, ed. M. P. McDiarmid (Scottish Text Society, Edinburgh & London, 1968, 2 vols). i. xvi, 54-5; *The Anglica Historia of Polydore Vergil*, ed. Denys Hay (Camden Society, Third ser. lxxiv, 1950), pp. 72-5, 124-5.

³ *Dispatches with related documents of Milanese Ambassadors in France and Burgundy, 1450-1483*, ed. V. Ilardi & P. M. Kendall, i (Ohio, 1970), pp. xxii-xxiii, esp. nn. 35 and

Emilio Barbaro's maxim, 'The Ambassador should not behave like a spy', was repeated in every work on diplomacy and ignored in practice. The prime function of the post of resident ambassador was as political intelligence officer. In the 1530s, when relations between England and the Holy Roman Empire had deteriorated sharply the Imperial ambassador's chief activity was to develop an intelligence system in England to supply information to Charles V. He expanded his staff to take on bilinguals. He patronised the alien mercantile community in London, and he suborned the households of Anne Boleyn and Thomas Cromwell.⁴ Some European governments protected themselves with ordinances against such things. Henry VIII's ministers and officers made a practice of opening ambassadorial letters. In 1516, Cardinal Wolsey not only opened the letters of the Papal Nuncio but when he saw their contents summoned the man to him, assaulted him, and threatened him with the rack.⁵

Much good intelligence came by way of the ambassador. But with the exception of two agents at the Papal court in the mid 1480s no resident English ambassador was employed abroad before 1505. Thus in dealings with her nearest neighbours and enemies, France and Scotland, England needed established centres of espionage from which to control the collection of intelligence. Calais was one such and for good reason; access to the sea, good lines of communication to northern Europe, and common borders with France and the Empire. John lord Dinham routinely sent Richard III's government news of foreign affairs. And when occasion merited it, on the death of Louis XI, or the arrival of a prestigious embassy, intelligence was transmitted to Dover by special messenger and boat. The deputy at Calais had a budget of £104 per year to employ spies, while the lieutenant of Guisnes castle, in the Calais March, had 50 marks earmarked specifically for 'the exploration of rumours and other business with adversaries'. Marke and Oye castles also had funds for espionage.⁶ Long range espionage was carried out by a number of agents some, like a canon of Lille, who visited provinces of France as instructed, and some placed specifically to monitor the French court. Three at least were anonymous, the so-called King's spy of Tournai, the King's spy of France and the 'Compaignon'. All three were controlled and paid by Thomas Spinelly, diplomatic and intelligence factotum at Calais under both Henrys.⁷ Calais also performed other functions. It checked the veracity of rumours of local French and Imperial ambitions and it kept a constant watch on French military preparations. In time of war it was the hub of intelligence activities for the local principalities drawn into alliance with England. During hostilities it saturated its area with

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⁴ G. Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (London, 1955), pp. 102-8, 223-4.

⁵ B. Behrens, 'The office of English resident Ambassador', *TRHS*, 4th Series xvi (1933), 164; *Four Years at the Court of Henry VIII*, ed. R. Brown (London, 1854, 2 vols), i. 117, 213; ii. 17.

⁶ Mattingly, pp. 151-2; *Letters & Papers of Henry VIII*, i. pt i, 97 no. 39; 100-3 no. 193; *ibid.*, v. 166 no. 48; C. A. J. Armstrong, *England, France and Burgundy in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1983), p. 109.

⁷ Behrens, p.173; *L&P* i. pt ii, 1183 no. 2694; *ibid.* iii. pt i, 88 no. 265.

spies, and sent agents to reconnoitre Normandy and as far away as Blois. Thus, for example, in 1513, one Joes Pierdux was sent to Veere in Flanders to journey to Brest in Brittany. He scrutinized all naval activity and counted every ship in each of the main French harbours. The northern border functioned in much the same way. A network of spies was employed by the Wardens of the Marches and the lieutenant of Berwick, and agents were maintained in the Scottish court. Reports on Scottish politics were received regularly in London; and not even the council or parliament were exempt from scrutiny.⁸

War and military activity has always engendered espionage. Christine de Pisan's 'Fayttes of Armes' advised its reader to be 'curiose & diligent to send forthe here & there his espies subtylli . . . to vnderstande þe purpose of his enemyes', to determine the size and equipment of his army; and to discuss such intelligence with his council. When war threatened between England and Scotland both Edward IV and Henry VII used a combination of disaffected Scots, Picards and merchants to spy for them. In the winter of 1479-80, well before his war with Scotland, Edward IV sent John Frysell and Richard Holand north 'regarding certain matters touching the king'. His payment, in 1482, makes Frysell's business clearer: he was on 'secret business' for the king. So presumably were Richard Barowe of Holy Island (paid £28 6s for 'certain matters touching the Scottish War') and John Papdye, merchant, who was rewarded with £40.⁹ English armies operating out of Calais used Flemish subjects or disaffected Frenchmen; while in return the Scots were the chosen instruments of the French in Calais and England.¹⁰

When battle was imminent and lines of communication shortened intelligence was provided by footmen and numerous scouts, scourers, prickers, fore riders and harbingers. Again this was advised by Christine de Pisan in order to ascertain the quality and morale of opposing troops, and the abilities and loyalties of their commanders.¹¹ Every army, every ward of every army had its spies, even the débâcle of a campaign in Navarre in 1512. When the army accounts were drawn up in December that year 66s 8d was noted for money paid to spies.¹² Before Barnet and Tewkesbury Edward IV organised a comprehensive postal system to apprise him of his enemies' movements. Up to a few hours before he engaged Margaret of Anjou at Tewkesbury he had men tracking her army in the lanes of Gloucestershire. Over twenty years later, in 1497, Henry VII emulated Edward. Lying at Sheen, well to the east, he threw out six riders as posts to keep him informed of the movements of his Cornish rebels. Tactics such as these invited counter-strikes. Thus as she approached Edward IV's spies Margaret of Anjou detached scouts from her army (at Exeter

⁸ *Letters and Papers relating to the War with France*, ed. Alfred Spont (Navy Records Society, x, 1897), 90-4; *L&P* i. pt ii, 1089 no. 2470; *ibid.*, ii. pt i, 187 no. 705, 238 no. 872, 241-2 no. 885; *ibid.*, iii. pt i, 1395 no. 3354; 1413-4 no. 3381.

⁹ *Fayttes of Armes*, pp. 50-1; *Calendar of Documents relating to Scotland*, ed. J. Bain, iv, 1357-1509 (Edinburgh, 1888), 298-301.

¹⁰ *L&P* i. pt ii, 968 no. 2139; 1050 no. 2371; *ibid.*, ii. pt ii, 977-8 no. 3048.

¹¹ *Fayttes of Armes*, p. 61

¹² *L&P* i. pt i, 688 no. 1495.

and Taunton) and threw them east and south of her real line of advance, to suggest an attack on London.¹³ Clarence and Warwick had similarly deluded Edward during the Lincolnshire rebellion in 1470 by sending him a string of letters which established a series of false positions for them.¹⁴

Virtually every successful attempt to overthrow royal authority in England in this period was launched from Europe or Ireland. Alone of the kings between 1450 and 1540 Henry VIII suffered no invasion by European powers, though the French threatened to land on several occasions. Naval intelligence, therefore, was vital. Threatened by invasion in 1487 Henry VII ordered Richard Edgecombe's ships from Cornwall to shadow the fleet of the earl of Lincoln and Francis Lovell. A few months after the battle at Stoke, Henry discussed the building of a ship for naval defence with John lord Dinham. This sensitivity to the sea paid off, for when Perkin Warbeck first appeared at Cork, in November 1491, Henry was informed by his naval intelligence immediately.¹⁵ The standard method of obtaining naval intelligence of French intentions in the Channel was kidnapping. Wishing to know the disposition of the French navy in 1513 Sir Edward Howard ordered the capture of several Norman fishermen and their transportation to the English side of the Channel. Kidnapping was practised in Scottish waters too. Christopher Coe, captaining an English ship in 1515 picked up several Scots who mistakenly identified his vessel, cruising in the Firth of Forth, as French, and went out to greet her.¹⁶ Safeguarding information at sea was therefore of the utmost importance. Commanders of boats carrying messages cross-channel in 1522 received instructions on how to behave if challenged by French vessels. They were to place their messages in weighted leather bags and lower them over the sides of their boats. Yet the sea revealed more than it concealed. In 1451 a storm drove the ship carrying the Francophile Scot, William Monypenny into the port of Whitby. Such were the contents of his casket of letters that they were sent immediately to the government by the Abbot of Whitby. Monypenny's goods were taken by the people of Yorkshire while he himself spent time in gaol before being ransomed by Charles VII. Similarly it was a storm which blew one of four Scottish merchantmen onto the Northumbrian coast in 1539. Its hold revealed, much to the delight of Thomas Cromwell, agents of Cardinal Pole and of Henry VIII's Irish rebels and all their letters which they had attempted to hide in the corners of the ship's hold.¹⁷

¹³ *Historie of the Arrivall of Edward IV*, ed. J. Bruce (Camden Society, i, 1838), pp. 70-8; PRO E101/414/6 fos. 74r, 75v.

¹⁴ *Chronicle of the Rebellion in Lincolnshire (1470)*, ed. J. G. Nichols (Camden Society, xxxix, 1847), pp. 6, 8, 16.

¹⁵ PRO PSO 2/2, 28 May 1487; SC1/51/110; A. Spont, 'La marine française sous le règne de Charles VIII', *Revue des questions historiques*, lv (1894), 418 note 6.

¹⁶ *L&P* ii pt i, 90-1 no. 287.

¹⁷ Bibliothèque Nationale, MS français 7155 f. 88r-v. a reference I owe to the kindness of Dr S. J. Gunn, A. I. Dunlop, *The Life and Times of James Kennedy* (Edinburgh, 1950), pp. 129-30; *Life and Letters of Thomas Cromwell*, ed. R. B. Merriman (Oxford, 1902, 2 vols), ii. 192-5 no. 297

By 1450 the regular collection of military and diplomatic intelligence was a normal function of government. However, the use of spies was undoubtedly stimulated by the civil wars. Henry VI, for example, paid informers for political intelligence in the mid 1450s. Recourse to espionage would have been second nature to many of the major protagonists at the opening of the Wars of the Roses as they were conversant with spying techniques employed in the closing stages of the Hundred Years War. While it is conventional to paint Henry VII as the greatest activist in diplomatic and political espionage, I would hesitate: Edward IV awaits exposure as a considerable spymaster. The exigencies of his first reign taught Edward IV the necessity for espionage. When Henry VI and his Queen fled to Scotland Edward built up the Douglasses as an English party within Scotland, and gave pensions to the bishops of St Andrews and Aberdeen. He also employed a Scottish merchant William Alaynson and his relations to supply him with political intelligence concerning his enemies, even to flush Henry VI out of Scotland.¹⁸ At the same time, in the early 1460s, since the Lancastrians threatened to ally with France, he conducted covert diplomacy on the continent. Four times in 1466 John Russell, future Lord Chancellor, 'exploratori' (*sic*), visited Burgundy. In that same year Edward sent other 'exploratori', spies, to Cheshire to run the hapless Henry VI to ground. This they did, capturing him in Lancashire. Ultimately Edward's life depended on his spies. In 1470 he placed a man in his northern opponents' army. It was this man who warned him that his capture was imminent before he fled to Burgundy.¹⁹ All this cost money. Jean de Bueil, in his *Jouvencel*, advised princes to spend about a third of their income on spies. In the autumn of 1466 Edward began the practice of allowing sheriffs to retain anything between £40 and £300 for their costs in detecting treason. So considerable did such activity become that Edward transferred large amounts of money from the exchequer to the chamber to facilitate his personal supervision of its financing; in 1468 he spent £2210 9s 'on certain secret matters concerning the defence of the kingdom'.²⁰

The possibility of invasion from the Low Countries and Scotland led Henry VII to much the same reaction as Edward IV. With Perkin Warbeck in the Low Countries Henry sent spies there. Their work reveals itself in Henry's assertions of his certain knowledge of the political situation in Flanders, and in orders regarding invasion scares. But the most spectacular undercover event of Henry's reign was the penetration of Warbeck's household in 1493-4. The Burgundian chronicler Molinet relates how Henry sent three important Englishmen to Margaret of Burgundy's house at Malines with instructions to obtain proof of

¹⁸ *Calendar of Scottish Documents*, iv, 271, 275-6; F. Devon, *Issues of the Exchequer* (London, 1837), pp. 481-2, 490.

¹⁹ PRO E404/73/124B. I am obliged to Professor R. L. Storey for drawing my attention to Russell's activities. D. B. Quinn, 'Edward IV and Exploration', *The Mariners Mirror*, xxi (1935), 275-84, esp. 275, 282; C. Scofield, *The Life and Reign of Edward IV* (London, 1923, 2 vols), i, 383-4; *The Chronicles of the White Rose of York*, ed. J. C. Giles (London, 1843), p. 29.

²⁰ Contamine, p. 226 n. 61; J. H. Ramsay, *Lancaster and York* (Oxford, 1892), p. 326 n. 4; PRO E404/74/1/64; E404/74/2/27.

identity of those who were corresponding with Warbeck. They ingratiated themselves with Warbeck, took evidence of involvement, in the shape of the seals of the conspirators, and informed Henry. Then, without waiting for his reply, they returned to England, covering their tracks, via Béthune and Calais. Two years later Henry sent spies to Scotland and paid a highly placed traitor at the court of James IV to undermine Scottish war efforts on behalf of Warbeck.²¹

Such methods were not limited to those in power. In 1494 Edward Cyver, a hatmaker from Northampton, was caught in London and accused of touring 'all the towns along the sea coast' to test their loyalty to Henry VII. His mission, apparently, was to persuade people that Richard IV, Warbeck, was their true king, not Henry Tudor. The king's household was no safer than Warbeck's. In 1492, in Rome, Margaret of Burgundy's servants engaged Bernard de Vignolles. He was contracted, among other things, to procure an apothecary's potion of such power that when smeared on the doors of Henry's palaces and houses it would cause anyone coming near it to develop an intense hatred of the king. Assassination was the desired effect. But the potion smelt so foul that de Vignolles disposed of it—down the lavatory—and made up his own less smelly concoction. Much more dangerous to Henry was the attempted mining of his household; for by 1494 both major household officers, the chamberlain William Stanley and the steward John Ratchliffe lord Fitzwalter, had promised to levy war against him when required by 'Richard IV'. Even one related to the king via the Stanleys, Sir Humphrey Savage, was in the plot against him.²²

It was the open nature of late medieval households which rendered them vulnerable to infiltration. Edmund Beaufort placed his spies 'in every Lordes hous of this land', in 1454.²³ During the Readeption Clarence placed pairs of spies in the households of Lords Northumberland, Shrewsbury and Stanley, one to collect news, the other to transmit it.²⁴ In 1503 Henry VII told Sir John Wiltshire at Calais to engage 'more spies' for use against Edmund de la Pole, especially from among his household. Edmund's brother suffered this problem to such a degree that when a seemingly genuine supporter of York appealed to him for succour he was so highly suspicious that he thought the man one of Henry VIII's spies.²⁵ It is Peter Gwyn's belief that no such skulduggery was resorted to by Cardinal Wolsey when he collected evidence for the prosecution of the duke of Buckingham. Yet, in 1965, K. B. McFarlane pointed out that some of Wolsey's information on Buckingham was supplied by

²¹ *HMC 14th Report, Appendix, Part viii* (1895), pp. 245-6; Jean Molinet, *Chroniques*, ed. G. Doutrepoint & O. Jodogne (Brussels, 1935, 3 vols), ii, 420; I. Arthurson, 'The King's Voyage into Scotland: The war that never was', *England in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. D. Williams (Woodbridge, 1987), p. 6; A. E. Conway, *Henry VII's relations with Scotland and Ireland* (Cambridge, 1932), pp. 102-8.

²² W. A. J. Archhold, 'Sir William Stanley and Perkin Warbeck', *EHR*, xiv (1899), 529-34; F. Madden, 'Documents relating to Perkin Warbeck', *Archaeologia*, xxvii (1838), 174.

²³ *The Paston Letters*, ed. J. Gairdner (London, 1908, 3 vols), i, 267.

²⁴ Armstrong, p. 108.

²⁵ *L&P* ii, pt ii, 1163-4 no. 3690.

two former colleagues from Magdalen now in the duke's household.²⁶ Cromwell put a man in the earl of Derby's household to report on his loyalty. But it is a dynastic crisis which is again most revealing. In the 1530s fearing a catholic Yorkist plot against him Henry VIII decided to liquidate the last remnants of the Yorkist royal family. In order to prove the treachery of Henry marquis of Exeter the king sent two household officers John Becket and John Wrothe to the west of England. His instructions to them survive. They were 'to visit their friends (both being westerners) and pass their time in that country using themselves after such secret fashion and manner as they be not espied to intend any purpose other than as before expressed'. Then followed detailed instructions regarding inquiries to be made about utterances and numbers of servants. While in the west they were to liaise with the king's trusted servant, John Thomas, serjeant-at-arms. Perhaps this sheds light on that otherwise oblique remark of Wolsey's correspondent, in 1521, that Henry VII proceeded in such cases, 'circumspectly, and with convenient diligence...'.²⁷

Given such practices counter-espionage was an absolute necessity, and this was well-understood by Edward IV. He picked up Lancastrian agents in 1462 and 1468; and it is clear that between 1465 and 1471 his political and personal survival depended on counter-espionage. In 1468, immediately before the crisis of his reign Edward authorised a payment of £34 to a 'secrete persone for a grete cause we wol not be named'.²⁸ This reference is completely impenetrable, but it is clear that the 'secrete persone' was to remain anonymous to those with access to records of government. Could he have been a man placed in the household of Clarence or the earl of Warwick? The problems faced by Henry VII were similar to those facing Edward, and so were his methods. Both Henry and Edward captured spies because of the vigilance of their port officials, Edward in Kent, Henry in the west of England. Crown and others' officers captured and transported spies for examination. In April 1496 Henry VII rewarded the constable of Shoreditch with £1 for bringing him a captured spy, probably Scottish. Similarly Henry VIII rewarded two men from York who brought him a spy in 1514. In part the English supporters of Warbeck were unmasked by the king's ability to 'turn' Sir Robert Clifford. Nor was Clifford alone in being 'turned' by Henry. He was very successful in persuading adherents of Edmund de la Pole to defect from their master and inform against him. Their reward—money and a pardon—was, on a smaller scale, what attracted Clifford back to England. On William Stanley's arrest he was given £500; and, two years later, promoted to master of the ordnance, he campaigned against Warbeck.²⁹ Anthony Spinelly was one who was turned. Employed as factor and spy by Edward IV, Richard III, Henry VII and Henry VIII Spinelly maintained a regular flow

²⁶ P. Gwyn, *The King's Cardinal* (London, 1990), pp. 163-5, esp. 164; K. B. McFarlane, *England in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1981), p. 259 n. 102.

²⁷ N. H. Nicolas, 'Instructions given by Henry VIII to John Becket the Usher, and John Wrothe the Sewer of his Chamber', *Archaeologia*, xxii (1829), 20-5.

²⁸ PRO E404/73/3/92.

²⁹ Scofield, i. 454; British Library, Add. MS 7099 fos. 2r, 3r, 6r; *Rot. Parl.* vi 454-5; PRO E101/414/6 f. 27r; *L&P* ii, pt ii, 1456, sub 4 Hen VIII; A. Hanham, 'Edmund de la Pole and the Spies, 1499-1506: Some revisions', *Parergon*, New Series, vi (1988), 103-20.

of intelligence from France. Indeed such was his notoriety that in 1513 Louis XII blamed the Anglo-French war on him. Yet within a few years Francis I was calling him his good friend. The reason for this swift change of attitude was that Spinelly had spent three years in a French gaol, and was released on condition he work for the French.³⁰

The consequences of revelation as a spy were dire. During Cade's rebellion John Wodehouse, valet and messenger of the king, was murdered in Lincolnshire by men of Wakefield who suspected he was a royal spy.³¹ Usually, however, it was government which took the active role. Nicholas Upton's *De Studio Militari*, translated around 1500, recommended execution for those detected as spies, and hanging was the expected fate of captured spies;³² although they were not always executed immediately. A servant of Margaret of Anjou was taken entering the country by the Kentish port of Queenborough. This man, Cornelius, was taken to the Tower and had hot irons applied to his feet to obtain information from him. Torture was readily used on spies. When Thomas Cromwell took agents of Catherine of Aragon and of Cardinal Pole he suggested that they be 'put to pain' on the Brakes to force them to divulge their secrets.³³ Interrogation was carried out in a climate of intense psychological pressure. Edward IV and Henry VII interrogated their prisoners personally. Following Warbeck's invasion in 1495 Henry ordered the wholesale execution of his followers by public drowning. A few, however, he had brought to him for questioning, and they were examined under threat of death. It is probable, as we will see, that they would have attempted to save themselves by frank confession, possibly fabricating intelligence. But if they did so it was to no avail. They were executed in an equally repulsive fashion: hanged in chains in the river Thames at St Katherine's Wharf near the Tower.³⁴

It has been argued by Christopher Allmand that the Hundred Years War saw such increased use of spies that the threat they were believed to pose intensified feelings of nationality and led to the creation of a statist mentality. This may hold true for France where treason laws were extended harshly to buttress the authority of the Valois monarchy. But for England, whose treason laws were not redrawn until the 1530s, and then for religious reasons, the argument is too extreme. It was the protracted warfare between 1290 and 1560 which created the state.³⁵ Certainly the Hundred Years War saw enormous sums

³⁰ *Excerpta Historica*, ed. S. Bentley (London, 1833), p. 116; *L&P* i. pt ii, 877 no. 1938; news ii. pt i, 89 no. 285, 10 no. 321; service, 255 no. 946; character, 161 no. 584, 4 no. 1453, 574 no. 1973.

³¹ PRO KB9/65A m 27. I am obliged to Dr Isobel Harvey for this reference.

³² J. R. Alban and C. T. Allmand, 'Spies and Spying in the Fourteenth Century', *War, Literature, and Politics in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. C. T. Allmand (Liverpool, 1976), p. 99; H. Ellis, *Original Letters illustrative of English History* (3rd Series, 1846), i. 328.

³³ Scofield, i. 454; Merriman, i. 361 no. 52; ii. 197 no. 298.

³⁴ BL Add. MS 7099 f. 26r; *Chronicles of England*, ed. C. L. Kingsford (Oxford, 1905), p. 207; *The Great Chronicle of London*, ed. A. H. Thomas & I. D. Thornley, (London, 1938), p. 260.

³⁵ C. T. Allmand, 'Les espions au moyen âge', *L'histoire* lv (avril 1983), 35-41, esp. 41. I am most grateful to the author for an off-print of this article

spent on espionage. In 1434 the earl of Arundel was allowed 1,200 livres tournois p.a. for spies, and 15,000 livres for journeys, embassies and messages.³⁶ The Wars of the Roses saw something like this in Edward IV's extraordinary measures. Nonetheless payments for intelligence remained generally small, *ad hoc* payments of £40, or one pound as individual rewards. Only after the civil wars, in the early sixteenth century, were regular monthly payments established for particular long-term spies: 10 crowns per month, for example, increased to 14, for the King's French spy in 1519. Only then do we find monthly payment of couriers maintained in France, and a regular courier system connecting government to the Border and its spies, instead of the irregular systems which prevailed earlier: responses to military or diplomatic crises. The development of organised espionage was coterminous with the development of regular diplomatic institutions as part of the state. In England these originated after 1514, when Cardinal Wolsey began to provide Henry VIII with an efficient diplomatic service.³⁷ Claims made for the uniqueness of the intelligence services developed by Elizabeth I are thus vacuous. Her counsellors drew on well-established late medieval practices.³⁸

War was the engine which created the state, but this only occurred once the problem of the internal organization of a country had been overcome. In England this was achieved through a steady increase in numbers of crown officers. Between Henry I and Edward IV's reign the household grew from about 150 to about 550; and continued to rise thereafter. By the late fifteenth century the crown had in its gift 800 and more offices. Every political crisis after 1327 saw more and more officers serving the crown, notably after 1399 and 1461, when the duchies of Lancaster and York passed into royal control. Without the duchy of York, crown offices would have numbered just over 600, but without the duchy of Lancaster they might have been as few as 350.³⁹ This rapid growth in numbers provided intelligence as never before. It was provided also by new household functions. Edward IV's household innovations integrated court, justice and crown lands in a radical way.⁴⁰ His esquires of the body were appointed on condition that by them, 'the disposition of the countries' would be known. Thus, noted the Crowland Chronicler, by 1478 Edward was, 'feared by all his

³⁶ *Letters and papers illustrative of the Wars of the English in France*, ed. J. Stevenson (Rolls Series, 1861-4, 2 vols), ii. 564, 565.

³⁷ *L&P* i. pt ii, 1050 no. 2371, 1051 no. 2375; cost of Compaingon, £4 per month, *ibid.* 1212-13 no. 2777; Kings' spies, France and Tournai, *ibid.* iii. pt i, 88 no. 265, 136 no. 390.

³⁸ B. Porter, *Plots and Paranoia* (London, 1989), p. 12.

³⁹ C. Given-Wilson, *The Royal Household and the King's Affinity* (Yale, 1986), pp. 258-9; B. P. Wolffe, *The Royal Demesne in English History* (London, 1971), p. 186. Calculations of losses of duchy of Lancaster, York and Warwick and Despenser lands from R. Horrox & P. W. Hammond, *British Library Harleian Manuscript 433* (Gloucester, 1979-83, 4 vols), iii. 199-206, 213-4; P. A. Johnson, *Duke Richard of York* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 20, 228-41.

⁴⁰ D. A. L. Morgan, 'The king's affinity in the polity of Yorkist England', *TRHS* 5th series, xxiii (1973), 5-7; *The Crowland Chronicle Continuations: 1459-1486*, ed. N. Pronay & J. Cox (London, 1986), p. 153.

subjects while he himself feared no one. Since most of his faithful servants had been distributed all over the kingdom as keepers of castles, manors, forests and parks no attempt could be made however stealthily by any man, whatsoever his distinction, without his immediately being faced with it.⁴¹ This is certainly the case throughout the period, when an indiscreet remark that Lady Margaret Beaufort was a strong whore resulted in interference in Nottingham by the Lady Margaret herself. Examples could be multiplied. Expansion of such control was continued by the first two Tudors, and had war not forced the immediate disposal of monastic lands in the 1540s, the result, long term, would have been further large numbers of crown officers established across the state. As it was, in the 1530s, 'nothing is more striking than the calm assumption that people will do their loyal duty in reporting cases of disaffection'.⁴²

In this development, as in much else, Henry VII sits uneasily. Where Edward IV was merely repressive Henry VII's name is a byword for informers. On the king's death, wrote Thomas More, 'No longer does fear hiss whispered secrets in one's ear, for no one has secrets either to keep or to whisper. Now it is a delight to ignore informers. Only ex-informers fear informers now.'⁴³ Early in the reign Henry refused to listen to what he regarded as political gossip inspired by envy and ill will. Ultimately this attitude gave way to a deeply avaricious nature. Henry established the one undoubted spy ring of the period, domestically, in 1500. Then 46 spies were employed to work for the king's commissioners fining the west of England after the rebellion of 1497.⁴⁴ But the exploitation of domestic intelligence under Henry was far from being occasional, it was systemic to his government. Henry's use of chamber finance allowed him to manipulate information in an unprecedented way. The books in which the king's expenses were recorded as they were met from the chamber, the Issue Books, contained memoranda 'dictated by Henry and constantly brought to his attention'. In 1496, when the chamber first achieved predominance in government, the memoranda sections occupied 50-60 folios. By 1505 these memoranda sections, fully developed, ran to well in excess of 200 folios. By then they provided a cumulative index of the political and financial life of England which the king and his chamber officials updated regularly. The 1505 book contains sections on revenue, recognizances, obligations, tallies, debts, wards, livery of wards' lands, 'remembrances', king's lands and wards' lands. The effect on the political life of the realm was catastrophic. Political decisions on patronage and grace were reduced to financial ones. This also meant, as Margaret Condon and J. P. Cooper have demonstrated, the sale of offices and the abuse of justice.⁴⁵ Two informers were paid £2 for notifying the king of a breach of Praemunire by

⁴¹ *Records of the Borough of Nottingham*, ed. J. Stevenson (Nottingham, 1885, 8 vols), iii. 300-1; R. Horrox, *Richard III, A study in service* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 16-7.

⁴² G. R. Elton, *Policy and Police* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 327-9.

⁴³ *The Complete Works of St Thomas More*, ed. C. H. Miller, L. Bradner, C. Lynch & R. P. Ojiver (Yale, in progress), iii. pt ii (1973), 101-3.

⁴⁴ *Letters and Papers illustrative of the reigns of Richard III and Henry VII*, ed. J. Gairdner (Rolls Series, 1861-3, 2 vols), i. 234-5; PRO E101/517/20.

⁴⁵ PRO E101/414/6 fos. 192r-234r; BL Add. MS 21480 fos. 29r-198v; M. M. Condon, 'Ruling Elites in the Reign of Henry VII', *Patronage, Pedigree and Power*, ed. C. Ross

the Abbot of Chester, while it was noted in the memoranda that he ought to pay a 'great fyne.' Duly, in 1508, his pardon was enrolled for breach of the mortmain statutes. Two pounds was given to three men of Lichfield for testifying at the trial of William Harper, the ex-sheriff of Staffordshire, of whom Dudley's petition notes 'he was hardlie dealt withal'.⁴⁶ Yet what does one make of the letter from the earl of Shrewsbury to Reginald Bray in which Bray was recommended to examine a thief from the king's gaol at Leicester. Should he do so it would be found that what the thief had to say would be, 'bothe to the Kinges pleasir and proffit'. But as the man was mentally and physically tough Shrewsbury advised that he be tortured. Very few entries in the later Issue Books of Henry VII reward either informers or spies. In the main payments to spies are found before 1499. There are, however, numerous payments to members of the political community, high and low, loyally doing their duty, and sending prisoners for the king to examine at court.⁴⁷

At this point we turn from those who used spies to the spies themselves. Who was a spy? There were those whose motives were purely pecuniary: the pilot who guided ships for the Scots and French and thought that the English would pay better; or the wet cooper from Béthune who could not make a living and thought he would be better off selling information to the garrison at Calais. Or the criminal who paid for his pardon by spying. But this sort, and the unbalanced, who occasionally drifted into spying were treated sceptically. The norm for spying was the itinerant: the servant, the merchant, the priest or the musician, the individual who, 'in a society in which mobility was indubitably an important characteristic', would hardly be noticed.⁴⁸ Every town account notes the gifts which the town gave to the minstrels of the aristocracy. When Clarence dominated the west of England (1471-8) his, and others', minstrels were rewarded once or twice a year in the region's towns.⁴⁹ The status of such men, not merely their peregrinations, made them spies. The 'Trumpet' occupied an important position in orders of chivalry as adjunct to the herald. As such they were intimate with those in power and possessed skills—mathematical and musical—which lent themselves to espionage. What information, for example, came Henry VII's way when he rewarded 'Trumpets' coming and going from Ireland between 1496-8? Writing to Henry VIII the count of Burgundy recommended Michael Mercator, a maker of instruments, praising

(Gloucester, 1979), pp. 109-142, esp. pp. 126-8; J. P. Cooper, 'Henry VII's Last Years Reconsidered', *Historical Journal*, ii (1959), 103-29, esp. pp. 110-11.

⁴⁶ BL Add. MS 59899 fos. 93v, 96r-v, 195r; *CPR 1494-1509*, 589; C. J. Harrison, 'The Petition of Edmund Dudley', *EHR*, lxxxvii (1972), 82-99, esp. pp. 88, 95 n. 37.

⁴⁷ Westminster Abbey Muniment 16057. I am indebted to Margaret Condon for this reference; BL Add. MS 59899 fos. 4v, 10r, 14v (a possible spy), 17r, 18v, 24v, 26r, 33v, 39r, 45 (a possible spy), 55r, 58r, 61v, 64r-v, 71r-v, 77v, 82r, 83v, 85r, 99r-v.

⁴⁸ *L&P* ii. pt i, 71 no. 214; *ibid.* i. pt ii, 1181 no. 2693; *ibid.* 1108 no. 2516; xi. 332-3 no. 841; Contamine, p. 226.

⁴⁹ North Devon Record Office, Barnstaple Receivers' Account Rolls 2006, 2011, 2014, 2015; Devon Record Office, Exeter Receivers' Accounts, 11-12 & 12-13 Edward IV; Dorset Record Office B3/M6 (Bridport Cofferer's account 1465-6); D. B. Quinn, 'Guide to English Financial Records for Irish History, 1461-1558', *Analecta Hibernica*, x. 64-6.

his skill and implying that he was a first class spy. Alamire, employed by Henry against Richard de la Pole, was a musician and music copyist who signed his letters informing on de la Pole with the musical notation 'La Mi Re', and included compositions for the king's delight. Mr A below middle C was a pseudonym.⁵⁰ The service done by such men should not be underestimated. It was Alexander Carlisle, serjeant of the King's Minstrels, who saved Edward IV's life in 1470.⁵¹

The medical profession also ensured access to privilege and secrets. Two Scots spies for whom the hue and cry went up in 1525 were a woman and a man with one ear who called himself a surgeon. One of the future Charles V's subjects, a doctor, was falsely accused of being a spy by an Englishman at odds with him at law.⁵² Professor Robin Storey has exposed the case of Cardinal Beaufort's Greek doctor, a humanist who worked for Beaufort for four years before taking up residence at the French court. He suggests that this is where the doctor's real loyalties lay and that he had supplied the French with information in the 1440s.⁵³ Certainly in the supercharged atmosphere at the time of the loss of France no one was safe; for when her husband was in a frenzy at the loss of Pont de l'Arche, Edmund Beaufort's wife felt it prudent to hide her French doctor lest he be suspected of betraying English secrets.⁵⁴

It was Edmund Beaufort who had his spies disguised as 'freres, some as shipmen taken on the sea and som in other wise'. Ecclesiastics were so common and employed in so many activities that their presence in espionage was inevitable. Edward IV used monks from Cerne and Abingdon to help locate Henry VI in 1465, and in 1492 a monk was one of two spies employed by Henry VII. Henry used priests to take his messages to Brittany in 1492 to contact Breton rebels and stir them against Charles VIII of France. And since he used them as spies and messengers he knew that they would be used against him.⁵⁵ Thus he ordered his Deputy at Calais, Gilbert Talbot, to prevent the passage into England of one Robert Stewart, friar, from France. Real clerics engaged as spies form one half of the equation. The other is the adoption of clerical disguise. After Warbeck's defeat in 1497 one of his followers, an ex-household official of Edward IV disguised himself as a hermit and avoided capture for several weeks.⁵⁶ Bernard de Vignolles recounted how a Spanish astrologer, hired to help murder Henry VII, was to come to England disguised as a pilgrim on his way to the shrine of Compostella. 'He would come to England in the habit of a friar,

⁵⁰ J. Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* (London, 1961), p. 315.

⁵¹ *Chronicles of the White Rose*, p 29.

⁵² *L&P* iv. pt i, 527 no. 1207; ii. pt i, 559 no. 1930; 655 no. 2159; ii. pt ii, 1150 no. 3450.

⁵³ R. L. Storey, 'Cardinal Beaufort's Greek Doctor', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* xxix (1985), 109-14. I am indebted to Professor Storey for this reference.

⁵⁴ *Narratives of the expulsion of the English from Normandy*, ed. J. Stevenson (Rolls Series, London, 1863), pp. 26-30, esp. p. 27, a reference I owe to Dr M. K. Jones.

⁵⁵ Above, notes 19 and 23. *Documents inédits sur le Complot Breton de M.CCCC.XCII*, ed. A. de la Borderie (Nantes, 1884), pp. 9-10 (brought to my attention by Michael Jones); *Letters Illustrative of the reigns of Richard III and Henry VII*, ii. 181.

⁵⁶ *The Great Chronicle*, pp. 283-4.

and because (he) had lost two of his teeth he would procure two others of ivory, of the colour of his own.' The pretended pilgrimage was a boon to secret diplomacy. It was a ruse advised by Vegetius, repeated by Christine de Pisan and personally employed by Philippe de Commynes. The Scots sent negotiators to England under colour of a pilgrimage to Durham; and the Douglasses negotiated with the English government while ostensibly on pilgrimage to Canterbury or Rome.⁵⁷

In the field of international news, dependence on the mercantile community was still very marked at the end of the Middle Ages. The Cely family collected news for the Prior of St John of Jerusalem, Edward IV's councillor. The Venetian and Milanese ambassadors commented that Henry VII was so well supplied with news by Florentines (who 'never cease giving the King of England advice'), that one could imagine oneself in Rome. But the role of merchants in procuring intelligence was more pronounced than this.⁵⁸ Edward IV, and both Henrys, relied on Florentine bankers to organise and finance their spies. Edward IV sent Gerard Caniziani, his Medici financier, to pay his pensioners and spies in Scotland; and in the late 1460s he drew heavily on Caniziani for loans. Subsequently Edward rewarded him, at his marriage and at his first child's baptism, for 'laudable and acceptable service'.⁵⁹ All three agents employed by Henry VII in Burgundy, Spain and France had mercantile backgrounds. John Stile, resident ambassador to Spain, had been a customs official in the west of England. The unrelated Anthony and Thomas Spinelly were members of the Italian commercial community, Genoese and Florentine respectively. Thomas was nephew of the head of one of the largest banking houses in the Low Countries with branches in Bruges and Antwerp. One brother was Papal chamberlain, another worked in Lyons where the Medici bank was headed by a Spinelly, possibly this brother. As resident in Burgundy Thomas was incredibly well-informed. He drew intelligence from the Curia, from Antwerp, Bruges and from the Italian banking system as well as directly from the head of Margaret of Savoy's privy council. Furthermore he was intimate with the De Taxis family who ran the postal service of the greater part of northern and central Europe. They supplied him with digests of news from all the monarchs who used their services. By trading news he collected it, and where this failed he used his own initiative. He suggested on one occasion hiring a forty-ton vessel to export onions and apples to Scotland with the real intention of spying. He it was who controlled many of the spies sent against Richard de la Pole.⁶⁰

Merchants were a major source of intelligence, and government officers regularly interviewed merchants coming from enemy-held territory. Indeed Garrett Mattingly maintains that Ernest Chapuys got more intelligence from his commercial contacts than from his bona fide spies.⁶¹ With the English Staple at Calais the garrison there clearly had an advantage. Lord Lisle, Deputy at Calais in the 1530s, numbered horse dealers as among

⁵⁷ Madden, p. 173; *Fayttes of Armes*, p. 56; Dunlop, pp. 140, 146.

⁵⁸ Armstrong, p. 109; Behrens, p. 165.

⁵⁹ Scofield, ii. 420-8.

⁶⁰ Behrens, pp. 161-78; *L&P* i-iii passim.

⁶¹ Mattingly, p. 234.

his informants, and in 1540 took a deposition from one Simon Rowborough. A fellow merchant had informed Simon that, while doing business with the French, he had overheard them discuss plans to attack the town. A proposed attack on Tournai was reported on by two bilingual archers of the garrison sent out disguised as merchants.⁶² Movement made merchants natural couriers. Chapuys sent intelligence to the continent amid exported Norfolk cloths; Henry VII was recommended to use the letter bag of Florentine or Genoese merchants if secrecy was essential. When Warbeck's masters in Scotland sent a letter to Margaret of Burgundy at Binche, they chose a servant of the duke of Ross to deliver it to the duke's merchant factor at Middleburg.⁶³ Thus governments felt obliged to intercept and open letters leaving England by commercial courier.⁶⁴

If anonymity was required the woman going about her business, between markets, was the perfect messenger. The *Compaignon's* news was taken to Lille by a female courier. Writing to the English government on the eve on a projected Scottish invasion Sir William Bulmer was interrupted by the arrival of the wife of one of his spies who had come because 'hir husband was suspect, so that he durst not come hyself...'. Equally, Sir William reported that among his spies in Scotland in 1523 he numbered one he called 'the Piores'. In the border war of intelligence it was reported, two years later, that the Scots had lost a female spy at Durham where she was captured and interrogated.⁶⁵ There should be little surprise at this, for as Philippe Contamine points out women were much involved in medieval warfare and were employed as messengers and spies throughout the Hundred Years War.⁶⁶ But again it is to Edward IV, and the great crisis of his reign, that we must turn. With Warwick and Clarence in France allying with Margaret of Anjou, the king sent Lady Isabel Neville one of her servants bearing an offer of peace. The woman's real business was to plead with Clarence not to be the ruin of his family, and to remind him of the deadly feud between York and Lancaster. Did he really take Warwick at his word when, having done homage to Henry VI's son, he said he would make Clarence king? The choice of this woman was made because of her shrewdness and because she could gain access to her lady, and thus Clarence, quicker than any male agent.⁶⁷

The best spy was a personal servant, and all kings relied on their yeomen of the crown, chamber messengers and the like. James IV's 'Master Spyour' employed in 1496

⁶² *The Lisle Letters*, ed. M. St Clare Byrne (London, 1983, abridged edn.), pp. 375-6; *L&P* ii. pt ii, 1007 no. 3120.

⁶³ G. Mattingly, *Catherine of Aragon* (London, 1944), p. 319; Armstrong, p. 109; Scottish Record Office, RH9/1/1 f. 125r-v.

⁶⁴ Archivio di Stato di Firenze a Prato, 664/308919 (4 July 1402), 64/308924 (4 January 1403), letters of the Datini factors in London relating loss of letters to English and Scottish governments respectively. I owe these references to the kindness of Helen Bradley.

⁶⁵ *L&P* i. pt ii, 1212-13 no. 2777; Ellis, p. 328.

⁶⁶ Contamine, pp. 241-2; Allmand, 'Les espions', p. 37; E. C. Williams, *My Lord of Bedford* (London, 1963), p. 218.

⁶⁷ Philippe de Commynes, *Memoirs of the Reign of Louis XI*, trans. Michael Jones (Harmondsworth, 1972), pp. 184-5.

was, prosaically, a groom of the stable.⁶⁸ Henry VIII's men in the west were an usher and sewer of the chamber. Richard Carewe described how one Edward Bone, a servant of Piers Courtenay of Ladock, 'deaf from his cradle and consequently dumb, would yet be one of the first to learn and express to his master any news that was stirring in the country...'.⁶⁹ Sir Anthony Ughtred, captain of Berwick, was advised by Thomas Dacre, Warden of the East March that the best method of sending a spy into Scotland was for Ughtred to pick his most reliable servant, pretend the man's dismissal, and allow his engagement by Dacre. The man would then operate for both of them. This exposes the weakness of espionage organised on the basis of lordship. It created overlapping and competing spheres which were not readily co-ordinated. At its best, in the Calais region, this resulted in the employment of numerous spies reporting to different lieutenants and commanders, vulnerable to counter-espionage. At its worst, in 1469, it led to a situation in which the sense of loyalty to commander overrode the common objective and led to military defeat.⁷⁰ Nonetheless loyalty engendered by long-term service was fundamental to espionage. As an ex-servant of Charles the Bold Stephen Fryon maintained his primary loyalty over three reigns. He sent intelligence to Burgundy from the court of Edward IV, his employment by Edward notwithstanding. Then, when under Henry VII, he became French Secretary, he continued loyal. On embassy to France in 1489 he defected from Henry's service to serve Margaret of Burgundy and Perkin Warbeck.⁷¹

Relaying information as Fryon did was crucial to power politics. Richard of Gloucester's first knowledge of the death of Edward IV, according to Dominic Mancini, was from one of William lord Hastings' messengers. Similarly Richard's ire against William Collingbourne probably owed less to the rhyme Collingbourne is supposed to have invented than to the fact that he paid a man £8 to take messages to Henry Tudor.⁷² According to the *Crowland Chronicle* it was Edward IV who instituted a postal system during his war with Scotland; in this he was followed, in 1483, by his brother who linked it to his spies, and in 1497 by Henry VII.⁷³ Thereafter it was an established feature of intelligence gathering. Lord

⁶⁸ *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, ed. T. Dickson (Edinburgh, 1877-1978, 13 vols), i. 173, 305; ii. 170; iii. 278, 323, 379, 390, 398, 400, 406-7, 409, 414; iv. 74, 164.

⁶⁹ Above note 27, F. E. Halliday, *Richard Carewe of Antony: The Survey of Cornwall* (London, 1953), pp. 214-5.

⁷⁰ *L&P* ii. pt i, 217 no. 819, overlap in espionage at Calais, cf. *ibid.* i. pt ii, 837-971. Edgcote, below n. 93.

⁷¹ C. S. L. Davies and M. Ballard, 'Etienne Fryon: Burgundian Agent, English Royal Secretary and 'Principal Counsellor' to Perkin Warbeck', *Historical Research* lxii (1989), 245-59. The date of Fryon's defection is to be found in John Leland's *De Rebus Britannicis Collectanea*, ed. T. Hearne (London, 1774, 6 vols), iv. 248.

⁷² *The Usurpation of Richard the Third*, ed. C. A. J. Armstrong (Oxford, 2nd edn., 1969), p. 71; R. A. Griffiths & R. S. Thomas, *The Making of the Tudor Dynasty* (Gloucester 1985), p. 111.

⁷³ Armstrong, *England, France*, pp. 106-10; PRO E101/414/6 fos. 40r-90v; E101/414/16 fos. 1r-4v; *L&P* i. pt ii, 956 no. 2111; *ibid.* ii. pt i, 187 no. 705.

Dacre relied on his news of the Scottish court being relayed to Wolsey on a regular basis; and the roads of the Low Countries were thick with posts of competing powers: England, the Empire and France. This degree of movement afforded ample opportunity for interruption. The Venetian ambassador reported the opening of the letters of the French ambassador to England, but he in his turn opened both official and personal letters belonging to the papal nuncio. Courier systems were repeatedly interrupted, especially at times of heightened tension, and *poursuivants*—the lowest form of diplomatic life—were sometimes imprisoned until they revealed the true nature of their missions. To circumvent the opening of letters to England in 1509 the Spanish court directed their ambassador in France to address letters going to England as if they were for Margaret of Savoy. Once in her domain the courier was to remove the label bearing Margaret's address and make for Calais and England.⁷⁴

In this unstable environment sensitive political information was safeguarded by the credence and the token. Letters of credence guaranteed the veracity of the oral report of the bearer; tokens guaranteed the origin of the message, written or verbal. The earl of Warwick sent Sir Robert Welles a gold ring prior to the Lincolnshire rebellion in 1470.⁷⁵ Warbeck's agents used bent coins, items of clothing, even a pot of green ginger as tokens. But the records of his last conspiracy of 1499 contain what is probably the first description in an English source of the use of cipher. In the case against him it was maintained that Warbeck gave one of his agents 'a certain book called ABC otherwise called a "Crosse Rowe" and under each letter in the said "Cross Rowe" was written a character or sign' so that they could pass ciphered messages between them.⁷⁶ Such a development in the Warbeck business was completely new. In the 1490s the Yorkists gave handshakes as credence. Between 1493 and 1495 they used code names: Warbeck was 'The Merchant of Ruby'. The recently-published spy's letter of 1480, written by one who later supported Warbeck, was not enciphered, nor were letters emanating from the exiled Henry Tudor.⁷⁷ Yet in 1505 Henry's government enciphered instructions to be passed to the Spanish ambassador in the Low Countries; and in 1507 Henry VII personally received a ciphered letter, though he needed it deciphering for him. Finally, in July that year, Catherine of Aragon provided Henry with a key to decipher a letter from her father. The king expressed himself much gratified. Thereafter the use of cipher was adopted by the English government.⁷⁸ At the end of Henry VII's reign John Stile wrote copious political analyses of the political situation in Spain. And when times required it he wrote four despatches a week—all in cipher. Reports from spies at the French court arrived at Calais in cipher where they were translated into French. Cromwell, ever vigilant in his dealings with the

⁷⁴ *L&P* i. pt i, 128 no. 261; *ibid.* ii. pt i, 418 no. 1497; 431 no. 1554; 445 no. 1601; 449 no. 1610; 484 no. 1726; *Four Years at the Court of Henry VIII*, i. 213, 314-6.

⁷⁵ Armstrong, *England, France*, pp. 103-5; *Excerpta Historica*, pp. 282-4, esp. p. 284.

⁷⁶ *53rd report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records* (1892), App. ii. 34.

⁷⁷ *Rot. Parl.* vi. 454-5; Madden. pp. 175-6; Davies and Ballard, pp. 258-9; Griffiths & Thomas, pp. 120, 125-6, 139.

⁷⁸ *Calendar of State Papers, Spanish*, i. 350-3 no. 429; 405 no. 502; 419 no. 526.

Imperial ambassador had broken Chapuys' cipher by 1535. It was against just such an eventuality that in 1522 Wolsey had issued a new cipher to Thomas Spinelly's successor: because Spinelly's had been seen by too many people.⁷⁹

The use of ciphers took root in England between 1490 and 1510, at least 50 years after their extensive adoption in Italy. The pressures of war, in Italy (1430-50) and Europe (1490-1560), created similar institutions of state. Following the Milanese model, governments developed the methods of permanent diplomacy: resident ambassadors and professionally staffed chanceries. By the 1450s the Milanese Cancelleria Segreta headed by Ciccio Simonetta had developed over 200 ciphers of the substitution type. The governments of Venice and the Papacy followed suit. In the 1490s, when Spanish diplomacy was expanded to check Valois ambition in Italy, the Spanish secretary, Miguel Perez Almazan, overhauled the secretariat and introduced the use of complex ciphers and worked closely with Isabella of Castille to create a dazzling repertoire of substitutional ciphers. Simonetta and Almazan used ciphers which operated by substituting single and multiple letters, vowels and consonants, with Roman, Greek or Hebrew letters, Arabic numerals or arbitrary symbols. Incorporated with the ciphered passages were coded names and sections of passages of *nihil importantia* intended to confuse potential decipherers. Simonetta, expert in Greek and Latin, was known to reserve all enciphered messages arriving at the Milanese chancery for himself. Ultimately he clarified his methods in the *Regula ad extrahendum litteras ziferatas sine exemplo* of 1474. Almazan was also a virtuoso creating ciphers of such sophistication that on the death of Queen Isabella it was necessary to simplify what had become an uncontrolled urge to complication.⁸⁰

The spontaneous generation of such methods is more apparent than real. By the mid fourteenth century a highly developed corpus of cryptology was extant in the Arab world, and in 1112 an Egyptian encyclopedia of 14 volumes contained a section entitled *Concerning the concealment of secret messages within letters*. Given the points of contact between Arab and European Worlds in Spain, in Venetian trade with the Levant, and in Sicily and Southern Italy, it is not surprising that ciphers were so widely in use thirty or forty years after their description in a Cairo encyclopedia.⁸¹ Such an influence, itself the product of sophisticated linguistic studies, fell on fertile ground. Simonetta was a leading Civic humanist and, significantly, a Calabrian; Almazan secretary of a council rich in members gifted with linguistic and legal studies. The ciphers they developed sprang from a conjunction of civic duty, humanistic skills and science. This is most clearly demonstrated in the case of Leon Battista Alberti. For while all practical ciphers of the period 1450-1500 were mono-alphabetic—that is there was one key for each cipher—Alberti, an artist with a

⁷⁹ *Memorials of King Henry VII*, ed. J. Gairdner (Rolls Series, London, 1858), pp. 431-48; *L&P* i. pt i, 693-703; *ibid.* ii. pt i. 17 no. 665; Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy*, p. 238.

⁸⁰ *ibid.* Chs 1-17; Ilardi & Kendall, pp. xv-xxi; *CSP Spanish* i. pp. xi-xiv, lxxxiv-v, cxxxvii-cxlvii; *CSP Venetian* ii. pp. lxix-lxxii

⁸¹ D. Kahn, *The Codebreakers* (London, 1973), pp. 80-3.

fondness for mathematical games, developed the first poly-alphabetic cipher in which each word was reciphered by use of two alphabets rotated against each other. According to his own account, Alberti developed this idea for the Pontifical chancery whose spies constantly intercepted enciphered letters. His text, *De componendis cifris*, was composed in 1466 but had no widespread impact. Diplomats continued to use variants of the mono-alphabetic system.⁸²

The most important advance in cryptography prior to the electronic era was made by the German lexicographer Trithemius—Johannes Heidenreich (1462-1516). In his *Steganographia* and *Polygraphia* he developed a fully poly-alphabetic cipher and provided a series of tables from which ciphers could be constructed. His work circulated in manuscript before the *Polygraphia* was published in 1518, and this resulted in the creation of a cipher literature, *de novo*, in the sixteenth century. Belonging to a tradition described as ‘a mish mash of gnostic astrological and occult Platonic naturalism’, Trithemius was a client of Maximilian I. By 1500 at the latest he had developed a poly-alphabetic cipher which was known to Maximilian’s council, though it was believed by one of his council to be a book for conjuring up spirits. By 1508 Maximilian possessed a manuscript copy of the *Polygraphia*, dedicated to him by Trithemius.⁸³ Warbeck’s Cross Row Book, his ABC, belonged to the first stage in the development of cipher: mono-alphabetic substitution. As such it could have been acquired from the Spanish, by theft, or from Rome where the conspirators had contacts, or it could have been supplied by someone in the households of Philip of Burgundy or Maximilian, since one of the individuals indicted with Warbeck in 1499 was a certain Flemish priest, Master James, who was acting as messenger for the plotters.⁸⁴ Whatever the explanation it seems that the Yorkist conspirators had stolen a march on the king they sought to depose. Henry VII did not use cipher before 1505 and its general use by the English government depended on the adoption of Spanish ciphers, in particular those transmitted to Henry by Catherine of Aragon. In ciphers Catherine was an autodidact. In April 1507 she could read but not write in cipher. By September, under force of intolerable political pressure, she had mastered writing in cipher. To her father she confided that he and Miguel Perez Almazan would laugh at her writing in cipher.⁸⁵

The activity of a spy is a short jump from black comedy: witness Andrea Badoer the sixty-year old ambassador of Venice attempting to preserve his incognito by running

⁸² Ilardi & Kendall, p. xvi; *Spain in the Fifteenth Century 1369-1516*, ed. Roger Highfield (London, 1972), pp. 276-96; F. Borsi, *Leon Battista Alberti* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 308 and n. 1, 376; Kahn, pp. 90-4. Alberti’s text was published in 1568.

⁸³ R. W. Seton-Watson, ‘The Abbot Trithemius’, *Tudor Studies*, ed. Seton-Watson (London, 1924), pp. 75-89; G. Benecke, *Maximilian I* (London, 1982), p. 9; W. Shumaker, *Renaissance Curiosa* (New York, 1982), pp. 91-131, esp. p. 97; *Maximilian I 1459-1519* (Exhibition Catalogue, Vienna, 1959), p. 59 no. 195; J. W. Thompson & S. K. Padover, *Secret Diplomacy* (London, 1937), pp. 258-9.

⁸⁴ *53rd report of Deputy Keeper*, p. 34.

⁸⁵ *CSP Spanish* i. 413 no. 516, 426-7 no. 541.

through his disguises—now an English messenger, now an English resident of Flanders, now a Scot, and now a Croat before finally resorting to blacking his face to preserve his identity.⁸⁶ The reaction to spying is little short of paranoia. Hearing of Edmund Beaufort's spies John Stodely warned his correspondent to 'beware suche spies'. K. B. McFarlane argued that during the Wars of the Roses, 'the suspected presence of spies everywhere added to the general sense of insecurity'. This may be true, but it is not something unique. Nor, bearing in mind the absence of fifteenth-century legislation on the subject, would it seem to have exerted as severe a hold on the minds of the people as did the spy scare which seized England at the outbreak of the Hundred Years War. In 1377 and 1385 Parliament legislated against potential alien spies, while 'Do not show to aliens' was a rubric for chancery clerks. The licensing of aliens in time of war was in part a public order measure (they were likely to be attacked), and in part to distinguish between the loyal subject and the spy. Every war with Scotland saw this process. And Henry VIII attempted to curtail French military espionage in 1522 and 1544 by ordering, respectively, the arrest and expulsion of Frenchmen found within the realm.⁸⁷ The evidence of Henry VII's reign suggests several widespread security sweeps. When, in 1495, Warbeck's invasion failed at Deal and he withdrew to Ireland, it was followed by an enquiry about Irishmen domiciled in England. In 1501, when Edmund de la Pole fled to Flanders, south-eastern ports were searched for his followers.⁸⁸

All these alarms and excursions are predicated on the assumption that the spy is effective. Yet governments were deluged with intelligence in large quantities; and a great deal of it, because of slow communication, was six or more weeks out of date before it was read. And who on campaign had time to read a sixty-four page intelligence dossier?⁸⁹ Certainly there were times when spies were invaluable. Richard III would not have survived Buckingham's rebellion without their use. But they were also a liability and a false hope. After the rising of 1483 Richard appointed John Neseffield, an esquire of the body, to control movement in and out of the neighbourhood of Westminster to prevent the undetected escape of its prestigious sanctuary men. Yet the marquis of Dorset eluded Neseffield, and not even the use of bloodhounds to track him through the nearby fields revealed his whereabouts. The *Crowland Chronicle* avers that about this time Richard employed spies at whatever price they commanded. However, not all their considerable activity, nor that of his naval intelligence, could discover exactly where the earl of Richmond would land. And the chronicler suggests that the continued cost of this highly

⁸⁶ *Four Years at the Court of Henry VIII*, i, 66.

⁸⁷ K. B. McFarlane, p. 259; R. A. Griffiths, 'The English Realm and Dominions and the King's Subjects in the Later Middle Ages', *Aspects of Late Medieval Government and Society*, ed. J. G. Rowe (Toronto, 1986), pp. 83-106, esp. pp. 88-9; Alban and Allmand, pp. 87-97; *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, ed. P. L. Hughes & J. F. Larkin (Yale, 1964, 3 vols), i, 140 no. 43 (1522); 326-7 no. 227 (1544).

⁸⁸ *The Great Chronicle*, pp. 260, 296.

⁸⁹ Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy*, pp. 104, 236; *L&P* i, pt ii, 1058 no. 2391, secrets of a French deserter, August 1513

paid system led Richard to abandon it, his initial profligacy thus contributing to his downfall.⁹⁰

The inability of agents to discover the relevant information is one shortcoming; but the age before telecommunication was the age of rumour par excellence. Governments wanted facts not rumour; and those whose job it was to coordinate intelligence at Calais and on the Scottish March were expected to be able to discriminate between fact and rumour. Thomas lord Dacre, wounded by the slur that his spies in Scotland were inactive wrote to Wolsey protesting that they were not so, but that he did not bother the government with every flying tale and rumour he heard. On the other hand Lord Lisle, at Calais, was censured more than once by Thomas Cromwell for his indiscriminate, time wasting, reports of rumour.⁹¹ It was the job of the spy to help discriminate between hard intelligence and flying tales, but they could not always do so. A false report by one of the duke of Suffolk's spies during the Pilgrimage of Grace that the people were about to rise again led to much wasteful military activity.⁹²

The impression of espionage given by propagandist writers like Polydore Vergil and the author of the *Arrivall*, that nothing ever went wrong, is far from the truth. Sent out to spy on Cade's rebels two of Henry VI's household knights were ambushed and killed. The Yorkist rout at Edgecote began, reputedly, with a quarrel between harbingers of the Yorkist commanders about lodgings for their masters which resulted in Stafford of Southwick's withdrawal from the field.⁹³ In 1513 a French spy was shot coming upon the English lines in the fog. Having revealed their position the French troops following him withdrew. The work expected of a spy seems also to have been directed by desperation rather than realism. John Stile reported in 1512 that Ferdinand of Aragon sent a man to Bayonne to contact the daughter-in-law of the widowed mayor of the town. Through her influence it was piously believed he could be induced to surrender Bayonne.⁹⁴ It was, however, counter-espionage that most encouraged fantasy. As Cornelius was tortured in 1468 to reveal the extent of the Lancastrian plot in England he revealed the guilty, the influential and the innocent. A few years earlier 'oon callit Jon Worby of Mortlond a spye' had been taken by Edward's men. Worby had confessed the whereabouts of Margaret of Anjou and her party and then embroidered a fantastic tale of a proposed Lancastrian invasion of England. The plan was of such complexity that it suggests not military cunning, but the desire of the spy to provide his captors with a good reason for sparing his life.⁹⁵ In the maze of dynastic politics no one was immune to the well-placed spy.

⁹⁰ *Crowland Chronicle*, pp. 163, 165, 175, *Usurpation of Richard III*, p. 91.

⁹¹ *L&P* i. pt ii, 1260 no. 2913; *Lisle Letters*, pp. 154-5.

⁹² *Lisle Letters*, pp. 172-3.

⁹³ *An English Chronicle*, ed. J. S. Davies (Camden Society, lxiv, 1858), p. 66; *Chronicles of the White Rose*, p. 24.

⁹⁴ *L&P* i. pt ii, 1058 no. 2391; *ibid.*, i. pt i, 616 no. 1326.

⁹⁵ *Three Fifteenth-Century Chronicles*, ed. J. Gairdner (Camden Society, 3rd Series, xxviii, 1880), p. 158.

In October 1468, at the height of his expenditure on intelligence, Edward IV sent John Boon of Dartmouth to the court of Jean V, count of Armagnac. The count had been a leading light in the League of the Common Weal and Edward hoped to involve him in his plans to levy war against Louis XI. After a delay of a month or so Boon left England from Fowey and travelled to the Spanish port of San Sebastian. Here he waited for one of the count's servants who took him to the town of Lectoure and lodged him at the sign of the Red Lion. At the inn Boon waited for a reply to Edward's letters. When it came he was told that the count would have nothing to do with the king of England or his letters. Boon was ordered out of Lectoure. Why the count behaved like this we do not know, but he was wise to do so, for after Edward had ordered Boon to Guyenne he had not gone directly there. He had reported the whole affair to the earl of Warwick, whose agent he was. Warwick told him to delay his journey until Louis XI had been warned by one of the earl's heralds. Boon therefore set out as if for San Sebastian but delayed his journey for a month at Exeter. When the month was up Warwick commanded him to travel to Armagnac, and then to go to Louis's court to report everything there. It was after this that Boon left Cornwall for Spain.

After he had been ejected from Armagnac's lands Boon found the French court at Amboise, and here Louis played his favourite game of cat and mouse. To reassure himself that Boon was who he said he was, and not an agent of Edward's, he disguised one of his councillors as himself and listened to Boon's conversation with him. Only when Boon challenged the French about the so-called king did Louis reveal himself, congratulating Boon, Warwick's man, for being so clever. Boon's story develops in a most complex fashion after this, but he remained in France and worked for Louis. In 1470, however, things went wrong. Louis desired his wife, and Boon was accused of treason and condemned to lose his eyes. His sentence was carried out but somehow he managed to escape to England where he was captured and delivered to Edward. Returned to France once more he was imprisoned at Craon castle.⁹⁶ John Boon's is a story which demonstrates the degree to which intrigue and dissimulation were loved by princes of this period. It is a story of the egocentricity of power, and of all those things I have dealt with: disguise, agents, paranoia, and foreign princes.

If it has a moral it is the wholly conventional contemporary one: do not meddle in lords' business. In July 1485 as Richard III strained with the information supplied by his spies to decide whether Henry Tudor would land at Milford near Southampton or Milford in Pembrokeshire,⁹⁷ Boon told his story at Craon. The comforts of his old age were a wife and the fact that on a day when the weather was clear he could still see. Louis XI's executioner, perhaps at his master's bidding, had not entirely blinded him.

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⁹⁶ C. Samaran, *La maison d'Armagnac au XVe siècle* (Paris, 1907), pp 162-72, 412-20.

I would like to thank Michael Jones for lending me his copy of this book

⁹⁷ *Crowland Chronicle*, p. 177