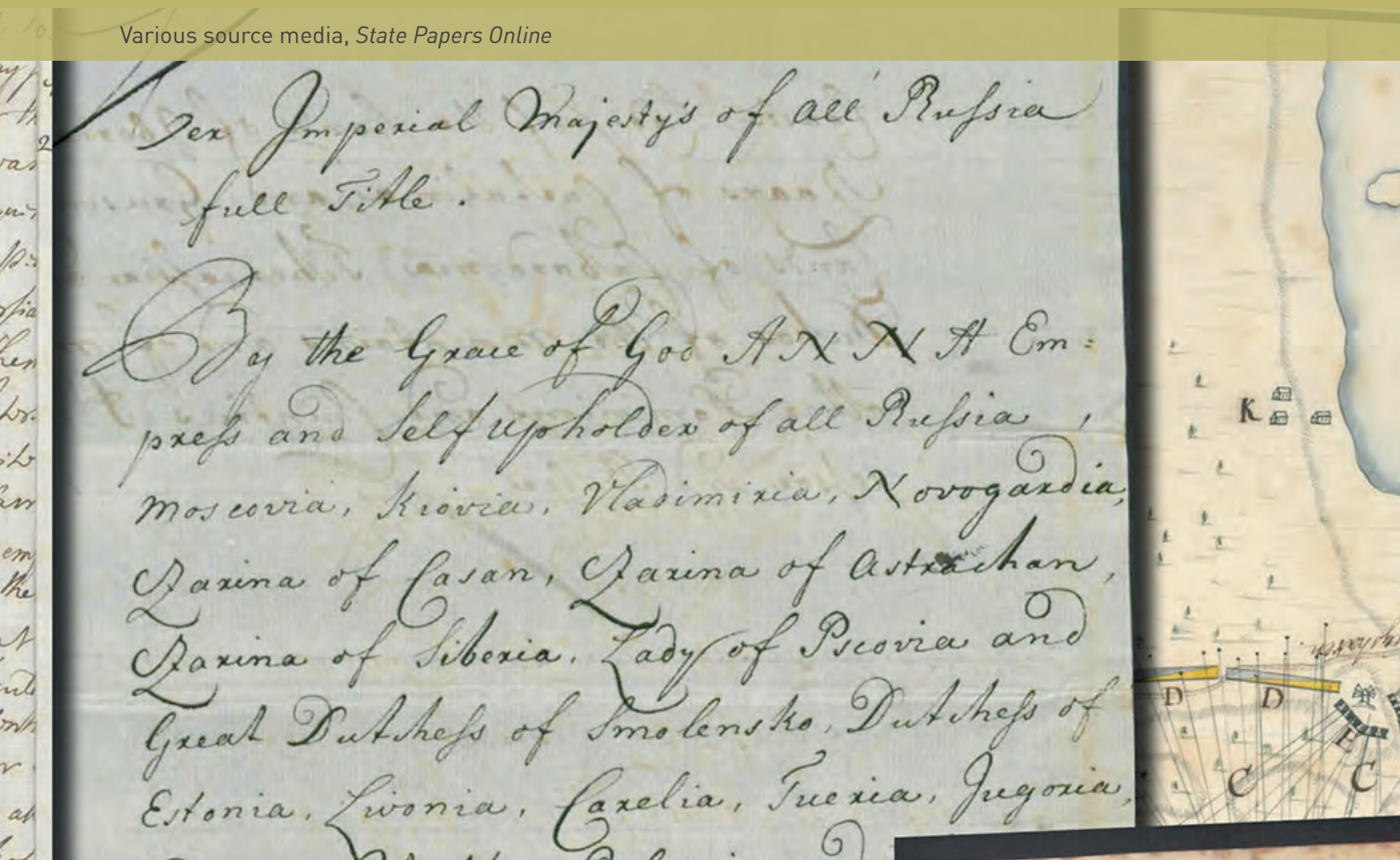


Henry VIII and the Break with Rome

Dr Richard Rex

University of Cambridge

Various source media, *State Papers Online*



Although the story unfolded with what seems like tragic inevitability, there was nothing inevitable about Henry VIII's 'Break with Rome' when what contemporaries called his 'Great Matter' began to reshape the English and European political scene in 1527. The 'King's Great Matter' was Henry's decision to divorce his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, in order to be free to marry Anne Boleyn. Although his real motive was most probably infatuation, the justification from the start was the claim that, in marrying the woman who had previously been married to his elder brother (Prince Arthur, d. 1502), Henry had contravened a divine law, and that therefore the pope who issued a dispensation for that marriage had exceeded his lawful authority.

The State Papers contain sheaves of paper arguing for and against the validity of Henry's marriage, though some of the most important papers are elsewhere. For example, it was only in the late twentieth century that the formal statement of the king's case was properly identified in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge. One of the treasures of the Vatican collection is a petition of support for the king signed by his nobility, addressed to Pope Clement VII and adorned with dozens of fine wax seals dangling on cords. The State Papers for the most part house less splendid documents. The earliest among them are some scrappy pages recording a fruitless church court hearing about the marriage in May 1527 and a letter to the king from his chief minister Cardinal Wolsey in June 1527, enclosing a Latin letter from John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester and England's premier theologian, giving his preliminary opinion on the conflicting biblical texts dealing with marriage to a brother's wife or widow. Legal and theological opinions on the case abound, along with business papers such as the

correspondence of the envoys who went to Rome to lobby for the annulment hearing to be held in England. Their work was partially successful, in that Cardinal Campeggio came to England as papal legate with the power, under the right circumstances, to annul Henry's marriage. But circumstances were not right, and as news came through of the defeat of the French army that had been campaigning to break Charles V's hold on Italy (and thus on the pope), Campeggio acted on instructions to revoke the case to Rome.

The debacle of the matrimonial tribunal in summer 1529 spelled the end of Wolsey's ascendancy in English politics. When Parliament assembled in autumn, a series of grievances was moved against the cardinal, and, after he had been indicted for *praemunire* offences, Wolsey acknowledged his guilt on 22 October and resigned all he had back into the king's hands. Fortunate to escape, at least for the moment, with his life, he went into internal exile in his archbishopric of York, which Henry let him retain (and in which he had never before so much as set foot). He died the following year, *en route* from York to London to face trial for treason.

For the next few years royal policy concentrated upon forging a consensus within the realm on the divorce. Foreign scholars and universities were canvassed for favourable opinions. Henry's cousin, Reginald Pole, led the successful bid to secure the support of the Sorbonne, still the premier theology faculty in Catholic Europe. At the diplomatic level, the main aim was damage limitation: to prevent the pope from making a swift judgement vindicating Catherine of Aragon and the marriage. French political support was crucial in this. The scholarly capital amassed abroad was compiled back home into a powerful statement of the

king's case, first announced in Parliament and then published in Latin and English as the *Gravissimae Censurae, or Determinations* (1531). The year 1532 saw the issue of a more accessible English dialogue, *The Glasse of the Truthe*, which summarised the key points of the case for a more popular readership, with a preface emphasising Henry's selfless concern to remarry lawfully in order to beget an heir to secure the succession. None of these propaganda texts, of course, ever referred to Anne Boleyn. Nor, perhaps more surprisingly, did any of the pamphlets written in defence of the Aragonese marriage. But people knew what was going on, and reports of 'seditious words' in the early 1530s give us a sense of the kind of thing being muttered on alebenches and in church porches. The Abbot of Whitby who returned to his monastery after the 1532 Parliament told his brethren that Henry was in thrall to a 'common stewed whore, Anne Bullan, who made all the spirituality to be beggared'.

The other thrust of domestic policy was to crush the resistance of the English clergy, many of whose senior members were sympathetic to Catherine of Aragon. The 'Reformation Parliament' that opened in autumn 1529 had already passed statutes encroaching upon the 'liberties of the Church' by legislating against certain clerical malpractices. Agitation against the privileges and abuses of the clergy continued in the House of Commons, though the successive drafts of the 'Supplication against the Ordinaries' that survive in the hand of Thomas Cromwell suggest that the complaints emanating from the Commons were not as spontaneous as they were meant to seem. The initial 'Answer of the Ordinaries', a firmly worded rebuttal of the Supplication, probably cost Stephen Gardiner, its chief draftsman, his chance of the Archbishopric of

Canterbury when it fell vacant just over a year later. Years of hostile propaganda, judicial intimidation and parliamentary lobbying bore fruit in May 1532 with the notorious 'Submission of the Clergy', by which the English clergy renounced its traditional right to legislate in ecclesiastical matters on its own authority and subordinated its power to the pleasure or veto of the king. This led Henry's Chancellor, Thomas More, to resign his office in what was widely seen as a gesture of protest. For the next few years he devoted himself to rebutting the attacks of authors such as Christopher St German, who were continuing to promote the royal agenda by challenging the status and prerogatives of the clergy.

The dénouement of the divorce was heralded in 1532 by the death of the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Warham, and the surprising recall of the little-known Thomas Cranmer, then an ambassador at the Emperor's court in Germany, to become his successor. Henry renewed his political amity with France that autumn, crossing the Channel to meet Francis I at Boulogne – and, significantly, taking Anne Boleyn with him in the first public recognition of her role as royal consort. She fell pregnant then or shortly afterwards, and the pace of events quickened. The precise date of her marriage to Henry is uncertain, but it was probably early in 1533. Thomas Cromwell was now busy drafting the legislative groundwork for the divorce, the famous Act of Appeals, which, proclaiming that 'this realm of England is an Empire', made it illegal to appeal outside the realm to any foreign jurisdiction (i.e. the pope). On this basis, the new Archbishop Cranmer duly delivered the longed-for decree of annulment at a court held, somewhat oddly, at Dunstable.

One of the reasons we have such excellent documentation for the 1530s is that Thomas Cromwell's working papers were confiscated, along with all his other property, when he was arrested for treason in 1540. As Geoffrey Elton used to emphasise, this archive probably stood much as Cromwell left it until, for the purposes of compiling the calendars of state papers in the nineteenth century, it was broken up so that the documents could be rearranged in chronological sequence. Cromwell's 'remembrances' ('to do lists' in today's jargon) open a fascinating window into the priorities of the busiest man in England. One of the recurrent items in the lists from 1532 was what to do about 'the Nun' (or 'Holy Maid') of Kent. This Canterbury nun, Elizabeth Barton by name, was a real thorn in the regime's side. A young female visionary popularly credited with miraculous powers of healing and insight, she was voicing increasingly outspoken criticisms of Henry's policies in the early 1530s. In 1533 she was arrested, interrogated, and induced to perform public penance outside St Paul's Cathedral while the Bishop of Bangor preached an official sermon discrediting her. The government sought to erase her memory utterly. Of two books printed at the time to publicise her revelations, not one page survives: an intriguing practical commentary, so to speak, on one of Cromwell's memoranda, which reads 'Touching the confession of the printer that printed the Nun's book'. Condemned by Act of Attainder rather than by due process, Elizabeth Barton was eventually executed, with a handful of her key companions, on Monday 20 April 1534.

This was the same day upon which the citizens of London were invited to swear an oath upholding the contents of the Act of Succession, the latest salvo in the

barrage of legislation that brought about Henry's Break with Rome. This act acknowledged the king's divorce and new marriage, the bastardisation of Mary Tudor, and the lawful succession of Henry's children by Anne Boleyn. It also challenged the authority of the papacy, which was the main reason it was refused by John Fisher and Thomas More, who found themselves in the Tower of London as a result. Records survive of some of their interrogations, as also of the judicial proceedings against them. They were executed, along with a handful of other dissidents, in the summer of 1535. But only a few people would take their dissent that far.

The regime's reliance on oaths is testimony enough to the atmosphere of insecurity that prevailed at Court as Henry severed a connection with the papacy that went back over 900 years. A systematic propaganda campaign was launched in pulpit and in print with a view to bolstering the kingdom's loyalty. Preachers were carefully chosen for set-piece sermons at Paul's Cross, while others were licensed to take the message to the country at large, and close attention was paid to what they all said. Henry and his councillors were understandably anxious about the popular response to all this change, and Cromwell's papers contain enough reports of seditious words to suggest a real climate of fear was created (wrongly calendared in 1533). The possibility of a public excommunication and deposition of Henry by the pope was a very real threat, and it was met by the most important of all Henry's statutes, the Act of Supremacy, which towards the end of 1534 formally declared Henry alone the full and final arbiter of the Church of England as its 'Supreme Head under Christ on earth'. A further statute made it treason to deny this title, and all traces of papal jurisdiction were

eliminated in a series of statutes running from 1534 to the Act for the Extinguishing of the Authority of the Bishop of Rome in 1536.

The campaign to elicit consent to the repudiation of the papal supremacy focused in particular on monasteries and religious houses, which could so easily have become centres for Catholic resistance. A nationwide visitation of monasteries was conducted by Cromwell's trusted agents, Lee and Layton, who reported regularly on progress. It was in the course of their expedition that the idea of suppressing a tranche of the monasteries gradually took shape, and the muck they raked together was edited and embroidered to maximum effect in the 'Compendium Compertorum', which was shown to the shocked Houses of Parliament early in 1536 with the desired result: the easy passage of the first Act of Suppression, an exercise in legalised pillage from which an earlier age would have recoiled as a damnable sacrilege. It was in the wake of this that Cromwell's letterbox started to fill with petitions from the nobility and gentry to spare this or that favoured local house, or at least to grant the petitioner a share of the spoils.

In the meantime, Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn, which had changed the course of English history, itself came to a shattering end. Rumours of coolness between them spread from around the time of her miscarriage on 29 January 1536 (the day of Catherine of Aragon's funeral, as many contemporaries portentously noted), and Henry's interest in Jane Seymour was also a matter for gossip that spring. Alexander Alesius much later recalled the first public sign of a breach between them, a conversation at an open window in Greenwich Palace on 30 April, during which the king could barely conceal his rage. Arrests,

interrogations, and trials followed with the usual impetuosity, and the unfortunate victims of demonstrably trumped-up charges were despatched in May 1536. The whole business had probably been sparked off by some unguarded comments of Anne's to Sir Henry Norris. She had teasingly suggested that he was hoping to marry her if the king died. Norris nervously parried this intimation of treasonable desires, and the exchange degenerated into a blazing row before witnesses.

The fall of Anne Boleyn, coming but a few months after the death of Catherine of Aragon, gave fresh heart to those of traditional religious sympathies. The Boleyns had been notoriously sympathetic to 'evangelical' (later to be called 'Protestant') teachings ranging from the Erasmian to the mildly Lutheran, and their eclipse seemed to herald a return to the old ways. Anne's replacement, Jane Seymour, was a woman of exemplary traditional piety, and she and Henry appeared in a grand procession on the feast of Corpus Christi that summer (15 June 1536). The clergy gathered at St Paul's for Convocation presented a huge list of erroneous religious doctrines, the 'Mala Dogmata', culled from the evangelical pamphlets of the previous ten years, for the bishops to anathematise (23 June). But the evangelicals, led by Cranmer and Latimer, had their own agenda. Hugh Latimer preached the Convocation's keynote sermon, a stinging indictment of clerical wickedness and a stirring call to evangelical reform. The resulting deadlock was resolved by royal intervention. A statement on controverted religious questions, the 'Ten Articles', was drafted in the king's name and with his approval. Essentially traditional in their theology (though with some verbal concessions for evangelicals), and

decisively hostile to 'Anabaptists' and 'Sacramentarians' (those who challenged infant baptism and the doctrine of the real presence in the eucharist), the Ten Articles nevertheless pointed the way to further reform of popular religious customs.

The injunctions for the Church of England promulgated in Thomas Cromwell's name later in 1536 took an even tougher line against certain traditional practices, especially the cult of the saints. Along with the first suppressions of monasteries and the collection of further instalments of the 'subsidy' (the chief form of direct taxation in the Tudor era), the injunctions contributed to an atmosphere of uncertainty and discontent which, in northern England, erupted in October as the Pilgrimage of Grace, one of the greatest popular uprisings in English history. The Pilgrims' views are well summarised in their song. The stand-off between the Pilgrims and the king's forces (led by the Duke of Norfolk) was defused in November 1536, but even after that the Pilgrims voiced trenchant criticisms of almost every aspect of Henry's policy.

The Pilgrimage served in the event only to harden Henry's heart against what he saw as 'papist' elements in traditional religion – notably the monasteries. It was not long before the policy of wholesale suppression took shape, and the last monasteries in England were closed in 1540. In the meantime, the second set of injunctions for the Church of England (1538) set about a severe pruning of the cult of the saints. Pilgrimage was a thing of the past by the end of that year, and the public burning in London of some of England's most devoutly venerated images, such as the Rood of Boxley, as well as the destruction of the international shrine of St Thomas at Canterbury, showed that Henry's

supreme headship of the church was to be no empty title.

The Pilgrimage may, though, have put a brake upon doctrinal change. 1537 saw the drafting of a comprehensive statement of the faith of Henry's Church of England, the *Institution of a Christian Man* (or 'Bishops' Book'), which clarified official commitment to the traditional seven sacraments even if it occasionally adopted wording that could offer some succour to the more evangelically inclined brethren. There was also hope for English evangelicals in royal negotiations with the German Lutheran princes of the Schmalkaldic League, which included detailed discussions over doctrine. Diplomatic isolation and the desire to make trouble for Charles V were probably Henry's main motives in these talks, although he still took a close personal interest in the doctrinal niceties. Hopes of doctrinal consensus, however, foundered on his commitment to the Mass and on his sharpening concern with heresy at home: on 16 November 1538 he presided in person at the trial for heresy of John Lamber. Along with his increasing inclination towards a traditional foreign policy of alliance with the Emperor against France, these concerns tended to weaken the position of Thomas Cromwell, whose authority was further undermined by the Act of Six Articles (1539), a statute which imposed adherence to six specifically Catholic doctrines and practices on pain of severe penalties. After some increasingly desperate factional manoeuvres, Cromwell, like Wolsey before him, fell suddenly from power and, in June 1540, was executed.

In the remaining years of Henry's reign, England reconciled itself to an uneasy religious settlement. A revised version of the Bishops' Book appeared in 1543 as the King's Book, for the most part endorsing

traditional doctrines and practices less equivocally than its predecessor. However, occasional victims still went to the block or to the stake for offences against the royal supremacy or Henrician orthodoxy – notably Germaine Gardiner in 1544 and Anne Askew in 1546. But for all Henry's emphasis on unity and uniformity, expressed most movingly in his Christmas Eve address to Parliament in 1545, he ruled an increasingly, if unevenly, divided kingdom, in which a Catholic majority coexisted uncomfortably with a small but often powerfully placed evangelical minority. With Thomas Cranmer apparently invulnerable at Canterbury, there was always some hope for the evangelicals, while the king's own sympathies continued to reassure Catholics. Just how unsettled the settlement was is evident as much from the ease with which the Edwardian regime (1547-53) introduced Protestantism as from the ease with which the Marian regime restored Roman Catholicism.

FURTHER READING

- G. W. Bernard, *The King's Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church* (New Haven and London, 2005)
- E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (2nd ed. New Haven and London, 2005)
- G. R. Elton, *Policy and Police: the Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge, 1972)
- R. W. Hoyle, *The Pilgrimage of Grace and the Politics of the 1530s* (Oxford, 2001)
- E. Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn: the Most Happy* (Oxford, 2004)
- D. MacCulloch, ed, *The Reign of Henry VIII: Politics, Policy and Piety* (Basingstoke, 1995)
- D. MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: a Life* (New Haven and London, 1996)
- P. Marshall, *Religious Identities in Henry VIII's England* (Aldershot, 2005)
- R. Rex, *Henry VIII and the English Reformation* (2nd ed. Basingstoke, 2006)
- E. Shagan, *Popular Politics in the English Reformation* (Cambridge, 2003)
- D. Starkey, *Six Wives: the Queens of Henry VIII* (London, 2003)
- E. Surtz and V. Murphy, eds, *The Divorce Tracts of Henry VIII* (Angers, 1988)

CITATION

Rex, Richard: "Henry VIII and the Break with Rome." *State Papers Online 1509-1714*, Cengage Learning EMEA Ltd., 2007

© Cengage Learning 2007

**REQUEST A
FREE TRIAL**

**CONTACT YOUR
REPRESENTATIVE**

**FIND OUT MORE
ON OUR WEBSITE**