

King Henry Tudor VIII of England: Breaking the Barriers of Tradition and Religion in the Pursuit of
Dynasty

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At the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in sixteenth-century Europe, King Henry VIII of England, motivated by his desire for dynasty, broke the barriers of morality and religion established by English tradition by divorcing his first wife. In the process he changed from being regarded as the “Defender of the Faith” to a pillar of the Protestant Reformation; a transformation that would prove greatly unsatisfactory to Henry. Despite the Pope’s decision against Henry’s divorce, his ultimate break from the papacy led to the Protestant Reformation in England that would redefine religion in England, and ultimately change English religious practices in modern day.

During and before Henry’s reign, the Protestant Reformation was already spreading rapidly throughout Europe. Martin Luther, one influential reformer, wrote and spread his “95 Theses,” assisting in the eventual coexistence of Lutheranism and Catholicism in Germany.¹ Another reformer named John Calvin spread his doctrines to Scotland, France, Transylvania, and other countries in the region. In both cases, the reformations were spurred by scandals in the Catholic clergy that upset and angered many citizens. However, the Protestant Reformation had not yet begun widely within England, as the English archbishops and clergy had little to no public scandal.² This lack of Protestantism was boasted about to great extent by King Henry VIII.³ This would change, quite ironically, during and following the rule of King Henry himself, as he would eventually break from the Catholic Church spurring the rise of Protestantism.

Henry’s childhood and father impactfully affected his future choices to pursue dynasty over his personal Catholic values and the traditions of his religion. His father, King Henry Tudor VII of Lancaster, took the throne from King Richard III of York in the War of the Roses, thus named from the symbolic red

¹ Morris, David B. "Martin Luther as Priest, Heretic, and Outlaw: The Reformation at 500." *Martin Luther as Priest, Heretic, and Outlaw: The Reformation at 500 (European Reading Room, Library of Congress)*, www.loc.gov/rr/european/luther.html.

² Pettegree, Andrew, Prof. Videoconference interview. 18 Dec. 2019. Professor

³ Henry VIII. *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*. archive.org/details/assertioseptem00henruoft/page/n3.

rose of Lancaster and white rose of York. Henry VII spent his rule fighting to keep his throne so he could pass it on to a male heir, and greatly valued peace and stability.⁴ The constant struggle of his father would prove to instill in Henry VIII a need for a legitimate male heir.

Henry was the second son of Henry VII, making him second in line for the throne. His elder brother, Arthur, was taught to rule. Even after his brother died from illness at 15 years of age, Henry was not given adequate education to rule, despite the fact that he was 11 when his brother died, allowing plenty of time to educate him.⁵ He was not even awarded the luxuries that accompany royalty. Since his mother died in childbirth of his youngest sister, he lived with his father alone. His father's household was simple and frugal, where they "saved candle ends, ate porridge, and turned its doublets."⁶ This restriction in childhood provides reasoning for Henry VIII's excessive flamboyance in adulthood. "Henry used the /1,800,000 [shillings] painfully accumulated by his father's austerity to set the English court ablaze with revelry, elegance, and personal ostentation."⁷

Henry was also given a different type of education called "New Learning." He was the first generation of English royalty to learn more than simply fighting; he was given an education in music, language, and religion. He went on to play numerous instruments including the lute and organ, and he even composed and reworked the compositions of others. This, too, set him up to be different from his predecessors, providing him a base to write his book and defend religion.⁸

⁴ Hanson, Marilee. "The obituary of King Henry VII, 1509 – Primary Sources" <https://englishhistory.net/tudor/obituary-of-king-henry-vii/>, February 10, 2015

⁵ Hanson, Marilee. "The Death Of Prince Arthur, Prince Of Wales, 1502" <https://englishhistory.net/tudor/the-death-of-prince-arthur/>, February 9, 2015

⁶ Shore, Miles F. "Henry VIII and the Crisis of Generativity." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1972, pp. 359–390. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/202310.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Henry's upbringing as a whole caused his obsessive need for a dynasty and his lack of diplomatic or well thought out decision making, which would eventually result in his many divorces and split from the Papacy.

The first divorce was of his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, and despite divorce being against traditional beliefs in Catholicism, Henry nevertheless broke this major barrier in pursuit of his male heir and dynasty. Catherine of Aragon, daughter of Isabella I of Castile and Ferdinand II of Aragon, was initially betrothed and then married to Henry VIII's older brother Arthur. The marriage was one based on "[uniting] the Tudors and the Habsburgs"⁹ and securing an ally in Europe, something important to Henry VIII's father in the wake of years of York rebellions after the War of the Roses. After Arthur died, leaving Catherine a widow, Henry VIII took her as his wife and queen. However, after twenty-four years of marriage and trying for a male heir, "Catherine had a daughter, Mary Tudor... but Henry wanted a son. Frustrated at Catherine's perceived inability to produce a male heir and now in love with one of Catherine's ladies-in-waiting, Henry declared their marriage nullified in 1533."¹⁰ Although he had a daughter, it was clear that was unsatisfactory for Henry. During one of Catherine of Aragon's six pregnancies, Henry wrote to his friend and advisor, Cardinal Wolsey, about his desire to have a son, saying "but as athyng wherin I have grette hoppe and [likelihood]."¹¹ However, the child to which he is referring in his letter was a girl and died soon after birth, further making Henry desperate for a new wife and a new chance for a son. He needed a secure line of succession, especially after the War of the Roses, but his personal desire for dynasty drove him to divorce Catherine in this pursuit instead of less drastic

⁹ Shore, Miles F. "Henry VIII and the Crisis of Generativity." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1972, pp. 359–390. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/202310.

¹⁰ "Who Were Henry VIII's Wives?" *Royal Museums Greenwich. Royal Museum Greenwich*, "Who Were Henry VIII's Wives?" Royal Museums Greenwich | UNESCO World Heritage Site In London, 6 Aug. 2019, www.rmg.co.uk/discover/explore/henryviiiwives.

¹¹ Henry VIII. "Catherine of Aragon's Pregnancy." Translated by The British Library, *The British Library - The British Library*, www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item101079.html.

measures that could have also secured his line. “The marriage of Princess Mary, his daughter by Catherine of Aragon, to her cousin James V of Scotland, or to Henry Fitzroy... could have sufficed and they were in fact suggested at the time.”¹² Nevertheless Henry opted to divorce his wife in an attempt to have his own son; a choice born of personal wants and not of necessity, and something frowned upon by much of Europe, especially Italy.¹³

Divorce was not something allowed in the Catholic Church, especially without adequate reasoning from the Bible, so Henry attempted to appeal to the Pope by claiming God was punishing him for marrying his brother's widow by not giving them a son, and therefore God did not want him to be married to Catherine. The Pope, Pope Clement VII, often described as a timid and indecisive man, procrastinated his decision for six years in the hope that an easy solution would appear to him. On one side, he had Henry VIII, King of England pushing for divorce, and on the other he had Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor and nephew of Catherine of Aragon pushing against divorce.¹⁴

The two powers each tried to sway the Pope, until after six years, Henry VIII had become impatient and angry at the delay, and with the support of Parliament, he declared himself Head of the Church in England in 1534.¹⁵ Before his official declaration, Parliament first passed the “First Act of Succession” which outlines Anne Boleyn and any future children of hers and Henry’s as rightful heirs, not his wife Catherine or their daughter.¹⁶ This essentially declared that Anne was his legitimate wife and

¹² Shore, Miles F. "Henry VIII and the Crisis of Generativity." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1972, pp. 359–390. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/202310.

¹³ Rhodes, Dennis E. "COUNT LODOVICO NOGAROLA AND THE DIVORCE OF CATHERINE OF ARAGON." *The British Library Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1990, pp. 100–102. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/42554297.

¹⁴ T. C. Price Zimmermann. "A Note on Clement VII and the Divorce of Henry VIII." *The English Historical Review*, vol. 82, no. 324, 1967, pp. 548–552. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/559428.

¹⁵ Roberts, J. M. "England: A Special Case." *The Penguin History of Europe*, Penguin Books, pp. 261-62.

¹⁶ "The First Act of Succession, 1534. Full Text." *Luminarium*, www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/firstactofsuccession.htm.

delegitimized both his first born daughter and soon to be ex-wife. He then declared himself head of the Church in a piece of legislation called “The Act of Supremacy,” in which Parliament officially gave him and his successors the clerical powers of the church to “visit, repress, redress, record, order, correct, restrain, and amend all such errors, heresies, abuses, offenses, contempts and enormities... which by any manner of spiritual authority or jurisdiction.”¹⁷

He utilized his new power in numerous ways, but most notably he dissolved the Catholic monasteries and gave the property to his nobility, further expelling the Catholic Church. Primarily, the decision to go against church tradition and the authority of the Pope in order to divorce his wife was barrier breaking, but then later to declare himself head of the Church, thereby giving himself the status and power of a pope, was unheard of. No English monarch had dared to so obviously and drastically break from the Pope, let alone the entire Catholic Church, the official religion in England. He broke the boundaries of tradition, power, and religion all in one act of rebellion, and did so unnecessarily.

Henry lacked any reservation in rebreaking these boundaries after his initial choice to divorce Catherine, evident in his five subsequent marriages, all of which ended in either divorce, beheading, or death of natural causes. His charm and power certainly assisted him in acquiring so many partners, especially in his younger years. He is often described as handsome in most records, and his letter writing skills, especially in the case of his second wife, showcase his intellect.¹⁸ The Venetian ambassador during his accession to the throne even declared "His majesty is the handsomest potentate I ever set eyes on."¹⁹ His second wife, and the sister of one of his mistresses, was Anne Boleyn. They had one child, Elizabeth I, who would later become queen, but she was still not the male heir that Henry so desired. They

¹⁷ "The Act of Supremacy." *Fordham University Sourcebooks*, www.thenagain.info/Classes/Sources/ActSupremacy.html.

¹⁸ Henry VIII, King of England, 1491-1547. [from old catalog]. *The Love Letters of Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn: With Notes*. Boston [etc.]: J. W. Luce & company, 1906.

¹⁹ Shore, Miles F. "Henry VIII and the Crisis of Generativity." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1972, pp. 359–390. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/202310.

continued to try for one. “Henry, however, had a naturally jealous and suspicious character, and was persuaded by an advisor that Anne was unfaithful.”²⁰ Anne was beheaded for treason, despite her numerous attempts to reassure Henry of her innocence in the form of letters.²¹ His choice shows once again his lack of rational decision making established from his childhood, and his obsessive need for dynasty. His wife had to be faithful in order to be a part of his beloved dynasty, and combined with Anne’s inability to bear a son, she had to be disposed of.

His third wife was Jane Seymour, the first and only woman to provide him with a son and male heir, Edward VI. However, much to the heartbreak of Henry, she died two weeks after giving birth to Edward due to complications from the birth. Henry then married his 4th wife, Anne of Cleves. The marriage was a tactful one, because “as time passed, the King and his ministers felt that England needed a foreign ally against the Catholic Church. Hans Holbein the Younger was dispatched to paint a likeness of Anne, with which Henry found favour.”²² Upon her arrival in England, however, Henry claimed she was too voluptuous to not have been married before, and despite marrying her, he was unable to consummate their marriage. The marriage was annulled soon after. He replaced her with her own maid of honor, Catherine Howard. Catherine was a 15-year-old courtly woman whom Henry had great passion for.²³ Unfortunately for her, “Queen Catherine embraced the luxuries she was uniquely afforded; King Henry never had a wife, remarked one sixteenth-century contemporary, ‘who made him spend so much money

²⁰ "Who Were Henry VIII's Wives?" *Royal Museums Greenwich. Royal Museum Greenwich*, "Who Were Henry VIII's Wives?" Royal Museums Greenwich | UNESCO World Heritage Site In London, 6 Aug. 2019, www.rmg.co.uk/discover/explore/henryviiiwives.

²¹ Boleyn, Anne. Letter to Henry VIII. 1536. *Fordham University Sourcebooks*, web.archive.org/web/19981206201035/http://www.signature.pair.com/letters/archive/boleyn.html.

²² "Who Were Henry VIII's Wives?" *Royal Museums Greenwich. Royal Museum Greenwich*, "Who Were Henry VIII's Wives?" Royal Museums Greenwich | UNESCO World Heritage Site In London, 6 Aug. 2019, www.rmg.co.uk/discover/explore/henryviiiwives.

²³ Weir, Alison. *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*. Grove Atlantic, 2000.

on dresses and jewels as she did, who every day had some fresh caprice”²⁴ Catherine, an “empty-headed wanton,” was also beheaded for treason.²⁵ She was accused of being unfaithful with multiple different men.²⁶ Henry’s last wife was Katherine Parr. “She proved to be a kind wife who looked after Henry in his sickness, and a good stepmother to the king’s three children... Henry trusted her so much that in the event of his death, he named her Queen Regent.”²⁷ She was an intellectual woman and clearly well educated.²⁸ Henry died at the age of 55 in 1547, leaving Catherine in power. Through each divorce, Henry continued to break Catholic tradition, and with each execution, he cemented his place in history as a man with little regard for moral boundaries.

History has incorrectly grouped Henry VIII with Protestant reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. While all three influenced the Protestant reformation in their respective countries, Henry VIII did so with no intention to start or spread an anti-Catholic movement. On the contrary, he was one of the Church’s most avid supporters and “with no monarch did [Luther] have a longer or more curious intercourse than with Henry VIII of England.”²⁹ Henry’s book *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* is an impassioned defense of the Catholic Church against the writings of Luther.³⁰ In 1521, Pope Leo X awarded him the title of “Defender of the Faith” for this work, a title still held by British Monarchs.³¹

²⁴ Irish, Bradley J. "The Secret Chamber and Other Suspect Places': Materiality, Space, and the Fall of Catherine Howard." *Early Modern Women*, vol. 4, 2009, pp. 169–173. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23541578.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ "Who Were Henry VIII's Wives?" *Royal Museums Greenwich. Royal Museum Greenwich*, "Who Were Henry VIII's Wives?" Royal Museums Greenwich | UNESCO World Heritage Site In London, 6 Aug. 2019, www.rmg.co.uk/discover/explore/henryviiiwives.

²⁸ Parr, Katherine, and Janel M. Mueller. *Katherine Parr: Complete Works and Correspondence*. The University of Chicago Press, 2014.

²⁹ Smith, Preserved. "Luther and Henry VIII." *The English Historical Review*, vol. 25, no. 100, 1910, pp. 656–669. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/550054.

³⁰ Henry VIII. *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*. archive.org/details/assertioseptem00henruoft/page/n3.

³¹ "The Queen, the Church and other faiths." *The Royal Household*, www.royal.uk/queens-relationship-churches-england-and-scotland-and-other-faiths.

Luther certainly disliked him too, and did not agree with his support of the Catholic Church, something evident in his response to Henry's work.³² Henry VIII could not have been further from a Protestant supporter, making many denounce their Protestant religion or face death, and "systematically burning and maiming the disciples of that creed...enforcing a proclamation for the public burning of all heretical books; and during the spring and summer of 1546 he sanctioned the martyrdom of seven Protestants."³³ He even executed his former supporters and advisors who objected to his radical move against the Church such as Thomas More who was "tried for treason at Westminster and...was executed."³⁴

Although he broke with the Catholic Church, he never broke with their core ideals or endorsed Protestantism. This in and of itself is barrier breaking. He was the first Protestant Reformer in Europe to not support Protestantism, creating one of the biggest ironies in early modern history. He redefined what it means to be a reformer and, according to Professor Pettegree of St. Andrews University, "without Henry VIII's divorce there would have been no reformation in England."³⁵

His legacy lives on in these unintentional consequences. Protestantism, the title "Defender of the Faith," and the Church of England outlive him even to present day. Modern English monarchs still must "approve the appointment of archbishops...formally open each new session of the General Synod (the Church's governing body)...[and] promise to maintain the Church in his or her coronation oath."³⁶

³² Luther, Martin, 1483-1546, and E. S. (Edgar Simmons) Buchanan. *Luther's Reply to King Henry VIII, Now First Englished After the Lapse of Four Centuries*. New York, 1928.

³³ Smith, Lacey Baldwin. "Henry VIII and the Protestant Triumph." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 71, no. 4, 1966, pp. 1237-1264. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1848586.

³⁴ "Thomas More (1478 - 1535)." *BBC*, www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/more_sir_thomas.shtml.

³⁵ Pettegree, Andrew, Prof. Videoconference interview. 18 Dec. 2019.

³⁶ "Religions - Christianity: Church of England." *BBC*, BBC, 30 June 2011, www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/cofe/cofe_1.shtml

Even when his own daughter, Queen Mary I, attempted to convert the country back to Catholicism, she was unable to do so because of Henry's choices, especially the dissolution of the monasteries. Professor Pettegree explains:

“When Mary comes to the throne, she immediately re-executes the Mass, but she is very strongly advised that there is no possibility of restoring monasticism, because all of the property has been given away. Most of it has been given away to people whose support she requires; the gentry and nobility.”³⁷

Henry's actions could not ever be undone, and they continue to have a large global impact in modern day. Not only is Protestantism still ingrained in English society, evident in their Protestant-based constitution, but English religion has impacted every colony once owned by the country. Most notably the United States, and the foundation of the United States, is closely connected with English religion. In modern day, the large array of Protestant churches can be traced back to early Protestantism, especially mega churches present in American Christianity. They, like the Church of England during Henry's reign, lack the authority of the Pope. So, in order to make sense of the “mass of contradictory statements” present in the Bible, these churches are “motivated by a single inspired individual” and have a single “charismatic leader.”³⁸ This is similar to Henry's position as head of the church and supreme authority, showing how his influence has impacted modern religion.

³⁷Pettegree, Andrew, Prof. Videoconference interview. 18 Dec. 2019.

³⁸Ibid.