Henry Viii 2 Essay, Research Paper

Henry VIII

King of England, born 28 June, 1491; died 28 January, 1547.

He was the second son and third child of his father, Henry VII. His elder

brother Arthur died in April, 1502, and consequently Henry became heir

to the throne when he was not yet quite eleven years old. It has been

asserted that Henry’s interest in theological questions was due to the bias

of his early education, since he had at first been destined by his father for

the Church. But a child of eleven can hardly have formed lifelong

intellectual tastes, and it is certain that secular titles, such as those of Earl

Marshal and Viceroy of Ireland, were heaped upon him when he was

five. On the other hand there can be no question as to the boy’s great

precocity and as to the liberal scope of the studies which he was made to

pursue from his earliest years.

After Arthur’s death a project was at once formed of marrying him to his

brother’s widow, Catherine of Aragon, who, being born in December,

1485, was more than five years his senior. The negotiations for a papal

dispensation took some little time, and the Spanish Queen Isabella, the

mother of Catherine, then nearing her end, grew very impatient. Hence a

hastily drafted Brief containing the required dispensation was privately

sent to Spain in 1504, to be followed some months later by a Bull to the

same effect which was of a more public character. The existence of these

two instruments afterwards caused complications. Owing, however, to

some political scheming of Henry VII who was trying to outwit his

rival Ferdinand Prince Henry, on attaining the age of fourteen, was

made to record a formal protest against the proposed marriage with

Catherine, as a matter arranged without his consent. Still, when his father

died in 1509, Henry carried out the marriage nine weeks after his

accession, he being then eighteen, and showing from the first a thorough

determination to be his own master. Great popularity was won for the

new reign by the attainder and execution of Empson and Dudley, the

instruments of the late king’s extortion. Besides this, it is unanimously

attested by contemporaries that the young sovereign possessed every gift

of mind and person which could arouse the enthusiasm of his people. His

skill in manly sports was almost equalled by his intelligence and his

devotion to letters. Of the complicated foreign policy which marked the

beginning of his reign no detail can be given here. Thanks partly to

Henry’s personality, but still more to the ability of Wolsey, who soon took

the first place in the council chamber, England for the first time became a

European power. In 1512 Henry joined Pope Julius II, Ferdinand of

Spain, and the Venetians in forming the “Holy League” against the King of

France. Julius was feverishly bent on chasing the “barbarians” (i.e. the

French and other foreigners) out of Italy, and Henry cooperated by

collecting ships and soldiers to attack the French king in his own

dominions. No very conspicuous success attended his arms, but there

was a victory at Guinegate outside Therouanne, and the Scotch, who, as

the allies of France, had threatened invasion, were disastrously defeated

at Flodden in 1513. During all this time Henry remained on excellent

terms with the Holy See. In April, 1510, Julius sent him the golden rose,

and in 1514 Leo X bestowed the honorific cap and sword, which were

presented with much solemnity at St. Paul’s.

The League having been broken up by the selfish policy of Ferdinand,

Henry VIII now made peace with France and for some years held the

balance of power on the Continent, though not without parting with a

good deal of money. Wolsey was made a cardinal in 1515 and exercised

more influence than ever, but it was somewhat against his advice that

Henry, in 1519, secretly became a candidate for the succession to the

empire, though pretending at the same time to support the candidature of

Francis, his ally. When, however, Charles V was successful, the French

king could not afford to quarrel with Henry, and a somewhat hollow and

insincere renewal of their friendship took place in June, 1520, at the

famous “Field of the Cloth of Gold”, when the most elaborate courtesies

were exchanged between the two monarchs. The prospect of this

rapprochement had so alarmed the Emperor Charles that, a month

before it took place, he visited Henry in England. In point of fact a

continuous game of intrigue was being played by all three monarchs,

which lasted until the period when Henry’s final breach with Rome led him

to turn his principal attention to domestic concerns. Meanwhile the

strength of Henry’s position at home had been much developed by

Wolsey’s judicious diplomacy, and, despite the costliness of some of

England’s demonstrations against France, before the French king became

the emperor’s prisoner at Pavia, the odium of the demand for money fell

upon the minister, while Henry retained all his popularity. Indeed,

whatever disaffection might be felt, the people had no leader to make

rebellion possible. The old nobility, partly as a result of the Wars of the

Roses, and partly owing to the repressive policy dictated by the dynastic

fears of Henry VII, had been reduced to impotence. In 1521 the most

prominent noble in England, the Duke of Buckingham, was condemned to

death for high treason by a subservient House of Peers, simply because

the king suspected him of aiming at the succession and had determined

that he must die. At the same period Henry’s prestige in the eyes of the

clergy, and not the clergy only, was strengthened by his famous book, the

Assertio Septem Sacramentorum. This book was written against Luther

and in vindication of the Church’s dogmatic teaching regarding the

sacraments and the Sacrifice of the Mass, while the supremacy of the

papacy is also insisted upon in unequivocal terms. There is no reason to

doubt that the substance of the book was really Henry’s. Pope Leo X

was highly pleased with it and conferred upon the king the title of Fidei

Defensor (Defender of the Faith), which is maintained to this day as part

of the royal style of the English Crown. All this success and adulation

were calculated to develop the natural masterfulness of Henry’s character.

He had long shown to discerning eyes, like those of Sir Thomas More,

that he would contradiction in nothing. Without being guilty of notable

profligacy in comparison with the other monarchs of his time, it is doubtful

if Henry’s married life had ever been pure, even from the first, and we

know that in 1519 he had, by Elizabeth Blount, a son whom, at the age of

six, he made the Duke of Richmond. He had also carried on an intrigue

with Mary Boleyn which led to some complications at a later date.

Such was Henry when, probably about the beginning of the year 1527,

he formed a violent passion for Mary’s younger sister, Anne. It is possible

that the idea of the divorce had suggested itself to the king much earlier

than this (see Brown, “Venetian Calendars”, II, 479), and it is highly

probable that it was motivated by the desire of male issue, of which he

had been disappointed by the death in infancy of all Catherine’s children

save Mary. Anne Boleyn was restrained by no moral scruples, but she

saw her opportunity in Henry’s infatuation and determined that she would

only yield as his acknowledged queen. Anyway, it soon became the one

absorbing object of the king’s desires to secure a divorce from Catherine,

and in the pursuit of this he condescended to the most unworthy means.

He had it put about that the Bishop of Tarbes, when negotiating an

alliance in behalf of the French king, had raised a doubt as to the Princess

Mary’s legitimacy. He also prompted Wolsey, as legate, to hold with

Archbishop Warham a private and collusive inquiry, summoning Henry to

prove before them that his marriage was valid. The only result was to give

Catherine an inkling of what was in the king’s mind, and to elicit from her

a solemn declaration that the marriage had never been consummated.

From this it followed that there had never been any impediment of

“affinity” to bar her union with Henry, but only the much more easily

dispensed impediment known as publicae honestatis. The best canonists

of the time also held that a papal dispensation which formally removed the

impediment of affinity also involved by implication that of publicae

honestatis, or “public decency.” The collective suit was thereupon

dropped, and Henry now set his hopes upon a direct appeal to the Holy

See, acting in this independently of Wolsey, to whom he at first

communicated nothing of his design so far as it related to Anne. William

Knight, the king’s secretary, was sent to Pope Clement VII to sue for the

declaration of nullity of his union with Catherine, on the ground that the

dispensing Bull of Julius II was obreptitious i.e. obtained by false

pretences. Henry also petitioned, in the event of his becoming free, a

dispensation to contract a new marriage with any woman even in the first

degree of affinity, whether the affinity was contracted by lawful or

unlawful connexion. This clearly had reference to Anne Boleyn, and the

fictitious nature of Henry’s conscientious scruples about his marriage is

betrayed by the fact that he himself was now applying for a dispensation

of precisely the same nature as that which he scrupled about, a

dispensation which he later on maintained the pope had no power to

grant.

As the pope was at that time the prisoner of Charles V, Knight had some

difficulty in obtaining access to him. In the end the king’s envoy had to

return without accomplishing much, though the (conditional) dispensation

for a new marriage was readily accorded. Henry had now no choice but

to put his great matter into the hands of Wolsey, and Wolsey, although

the whole divorce policy ran counter to his better judgment, strained

every nerve to secure a decision in his master’s favour. An account of the

mission of Gardiner and Foxe and of the failure of the divorce

proceedings before the papal commissioners, Wolsey and Campeggio,

mainly on account of the production of the Brief, has been given in some

detail in the article CLEMENT VII, to which the reader is referred. The

revocation of the cause to Rome in July, 1529, owing, no doubt, in part

to Queen Catherine’s most reasonable protests against her helplessness in

England and the compulsion to which she was subjected, had many

important results. First among these we must count the disgrace and fall

of Wolsey, hitherto the only real check upon Henry’s wilfulness. The

incredible meanness of the praemunire, and consequent confiscation,

which the cardinal was pronounced to have incurred for obtaining the

cardinalate and legateship from Rome though of course this had been

done with the king’s full knowledge and consent would alone suffice to

stamp Henry as one of the basest of mankind. But, secondly, we may

trace to this same crisis the rise of both Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell,

the two great architects of Henry’s new policy. It was Cranmer who, in

the autumn of 1529, made the momentous suggestion that the king should

consult the universities of Europe upon the question of the nullity of his

marriage, a suggestion which at once brought its author into favour.

The project was carried out as soon as possible with a lavish expenditure

of bribes, and the use of other means of pressure. The result was naturally

highly favourable to the king’s wishes, though the universities which lay

within the dominions of Charles V were not consulted. The answers were

submitted to Parliament, where the king still kept the pretense of having

no personal interest in the matter. He professed to be suffering from

scruples of conscience, now rendered more acute by such a weight of

learned opinion. With the same astuteness he persuaded the leading

nobility of the kingdom to write to the pope praying him to give sentence

in Henry’s favour for fear that worse might follow. All this drew the king

into closer relations with Cranmer, who was made ambassador to the

emperor, and who, a year or two afterwards, despite the fact that he had

just married Osiander’s niece (his second wife), was summoned home to

become Archbishop of Canterbury. The necessary Bulls and the pallium

were obtained from Rome under threat that the law (referred to again

below) for the abolition of annates and first-fruits would be made

permanent. The vacillating Clement who probably hoped that by

making every other kind of concession he might be able to maintain the

position he had assumed upon the more vital question of the divorce

conceded Bulls and pallium. But to benefit by them it was necessary that

Cranmer should take certain prescribed oaths of obedience to the Holy

See. He took the oaths, but committed to writing a solemn protest that he

considered the oaths in no way binding in conscience, a procedure which

even so prejudiced a historian as Mr. H.A. Fisher cannot refrain from

describing as a “signal dishonesty.” “If”, asks Dr. Lingard, “it be simony to

purchase spiritual office by money, what is it to purchase the same by

perjury?” The father of the new Church of England, and future compiler

of its liturgy, was not entering upon his functions under very propitious

auspices.

But the Church which was soon to be brought into being probably owes

even more to Thomas Cromwell than to its first archbishop. It is

Cromwell who seems to have suggested to Henry as a deliberate policy

that he should abolish the imperium in imperio, throw off the papal

supremacy, and make himself the supreme head of his own religion. This

was in fact the course which from the latter part of 1529 Henry

undeviatingly followed, though he did not at first go to lengths from which

there was no retreat. The first blow was struck at the clergy by involving

them in Wolsey’s praemunire. Some anti-clerical disaffection there had

always been, partly, no doubt, the remnants of Lollardy, as was instanced

in the case of Richard Hunne, 1515. This, of late years, had been a good

deal aggravated by the importation into England of Tyndale’s annotated

New Testament and other books of heretical tendency, which, though

prohibited and burnt by authority, still made their way among the people.

Henry and his ministers had, therefore, some popular support upon which

they could fall back, if necessary, in their campaign to reduce the clergy

to abject submission. At the beginning of 1531 the Convocation of

Canterbury were informed that they could purchase a pardon for the

praemunire they had incurred by presenting the king with the enormous

sum of 100,000 pounds. Further, they were bidden to recognize the king

as “Protector and Supreme Head of the Church of England.”

Convocation struggled desperately against the demand, and in the end

succeeded in inserting the qualification “so far as is allowed by the law of

Christ.” But this was only a brief respite. A year later Parliament under

pressure passed an edict forbidding the payment to the Holy See of

Annates or first-fruits, but the operation of it was for the present

suspended at the sovereign’s pleasure, and the king was meanwhile

solicited to come to an amicable understanding with “His Holiness” on the

subject of the divorce. The measure amounted to a decently veiled threat

to withdraw this source of income from the Holy See altogether if the

divorce was refused. Still the pope held out, and so did the queen. Only a

little time before, a deputation of lords and bishops of course by the

king’s order had visited Catherine and had rudely urged her to

withdraw the appeal in virtue of which the king, contrary to his dignity,

had been cited to appear personally at Rome; but though deprived of all

counsel, she stood firm. In the May of 1532 further pressure was brought

to bear upon Convocation, and resulted in the so-called “Submission of

the Clergy”, by which they practically renounced all right of legislation

except in dependence upon the king.

An honest man like Sir Thomas More could no longer pretend to work

with the Government, and he resigned the chancellorship, which he had

held since the fall of Wolsey. The situation was too strained to last, and

the end came through the death of Archbishop Warham in August, 1532.

In the appointment of Cranmer as his successor, the king knew that he

had secured a subservient tool who desired nothing better than to see the

papal authority overthrown. Anne Boleyn was then enceinte, and the

king, relying, no doubt, on what Cranmer when consecrated would be

ready to do for him, went through a form of marriage with her on 25

January, 1533. On 15 April Cranmer received consecration. On 23 May,

Parliament having meanwhile forbidden all appeals to Rome, Cranmer

pronounced Henry’s former marriage invalid. On 28 May he declared the

marriage with Anne valid. On 1 June Anne was crowned, and on 7

September she gave birth to a daughter, the future Queen Elizabeth.

Clement, who had previously sent to Henry more than one monition upon

his desertion of Catherine, issued a Bull of excommunication on 11 July,

declaring, also, his divorce and remarriage null. In England Catherine was

deprived of her title of Queen, and Mary her daughter was treated as a

bastard. Much sympathy was aroused among the populace, to meet

which severe measures were taken against the more conspicuous of the

disaffected, particularly the “Nun of Kent”, who claimed to have had

revelations of God’s displeasure at the recent course of events.

In the course of the next year the breach with Rome was completed.

Parliament did all that was required of it. Annates, Peter’s Pence, and

other payments to Rome were finally abolished. An Act of Succession

entailed the crown on the children of Anne Boleyn, and an oath was

drawn up to be exacted of every person of lawful age. It was the refusal

to take this oath, the preamble of which declared Henry’s marriage with

Catherine null from the beginning, which sent More and Fisher to the

Tower, and eventually to the block. A certain number of Carthusian

monks, Brigittines, and Observant Franciscans imitated their firmness and

shared their fate. All these have been beatified in modern times by Pope

Leo XIII. There were, however, but a handful who were thus true to their

convictions. Declarations were obtained from the clergy in both provinces

“that the Bishop of Rome hath no greater jurisdiction conferred upon him

by God in this kingdom of England than any other foreign bishop”, while

Parliament, in November, declared the king “Supreme Head of the

Church of England”, and shortly afterwards Cromwell, a layman, was

appointed vicar-general to rule the English Church in the king’s name.

Though the people were cowed, these measures were not carried out

without much disaffection, and, to stamp out any overt expression of this,

Cromwell and his master now embarked upon a veritable reign of terror.

The martyrs already referred to were most of them brought to the

scaffold in the course of 1535, but fourteen Dutch Anabaptists also

suffered death by burning in the same year. There followed a visitation of

the monasteries, unscrupulous instruments like Layton, Legh, and Price

being appointed for the purpose. They played, of course, into the king’s

hand and compiled comperta abounding in charges of disgraceful

immorality, which have been shown to be at least grossly exaggerated. In

pursuance of the same policy Parliament, in February, 1536, acting under

great pressure, voted to the king the property of all religious houses with

less than 200 pounds a year of annual income, recommending that the

inmates should be transferred to the larger houses where “religion happily

was right well observed.” The dissolution, when carried out, produced

much popular resentment, especially in Lincolnshire and the northern

counties. Eventually, in the autumn of 1536, the people banded together

in a very formidable insurrection known as the Pilgrimage of Grace. The

insurgents rallied under the device of the Five Wounds, and they were

only induced to disperse by the deceitful promises of Henry’s

representative, the Duke of Norfolk. The suppression of the larger

monasteries rapidly followed, and with these were swept away

numberless shrines, statues, and objects of pious veneration, on the

pretext that these were purely superstitious. It is easy to see that the lust

of plunder was the motive which prompted this wholesale confiscation.

(See SUPPRESSION OF THE MONASTERIES.)

Meanwhile, Henry, though taking advantage of the spirit of religious

innovation now rife among the people whenever it suited his purpose,

remained still attached to the sacramental system in which he had been

brought up. In 1539 the Statute of the Six Articles enforced, under the

severest penalties, such doctrines as transubstantiation, Communion

under one kind, auricular confession, and the celibacy of the clergy.

Under this act offenders were sent to the stake for their Protestantism just

as ruthlessly as the aged Margaret, Countess of Salisbury, was attainted

by Parliament and eventually beheaded, simply because Henry was

irritated by the denunciations of her son Cardinal Pole. Neither was the

king less cruel towards those who were nearest to him. Anne Boleyn and

Catherine Howard, his second and fifth wives, perished on the scaffold,

but their whilom lord only paraded his indifference regarding the fate to

which he had condemned them. On 30 July, 1540, of six victims who

were dragged to Smithfield, three were Reformers burnt for heretical

doctrine, and the other three Catholics, hanged and quartered for denying

the king’s supremacy. Of all the numerous miserable beings whom Henry

sent to execution, Cromwell, perhaps, is the only one who fully deserved

his fate. Looking at the last fifteen years of Henry’s life, it is hard to find

one single feature which does not evoke repulsion, and the attempts made

by some writers to whitewash his misdeeds only give proof of the

extraordinary prejudice with which they approach the subject. Henry’s

cruelties continued to the last, and so likewise did his inconsistencies. One

of the last measures of confiscation of his reign was an act of suppression

of chantries, but Henry by his last will and testament established what

were practically chantries to have Masses said for his own sou