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A WORLD LIT ONLY BY FIRE

THE MEDIEVAL MIND
AND THE RENAISSANCE

PORTRAIT OF AN AGE

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possession of Protestant literature was a felony; advocacy of heretical ideas was a capital offense; and informers were encouraged by assigning them, after convictions, one-third of the condemned's goods. Trials were conducted by a special commission, whose court came to be known as *le chambre ardente*, the burning room. In less than three years the commission sentenced sixty Frenchmen to the stake. Anne du Bourg, a university rector and a member of the Paris Parlement, suggested that executions be postponed until the Council of Trent defined Catholic orthodoxy. Henry had him arrested. He meant to see him burn, too, but destiny — the Protestants naturally said it was God — intervened. The king was killed in a tournament in 1559. His queen, his mistress, and the Vicar of Christ mourned him. Du Bourg, of course, did not, though he went to his death anyway as a *martyr luthérien*.



HENRY II OF France had been admired, applauded, and blessed in St. Peter's, but in the twelve years following the rise of Luther the sovereign most cherished in Rome was Henry VIII of England. Henry seemed, indeed, the answer to a Holy Father's prayers. The fact that his handsome features, golden beard, and athletic build also made him the answer to maidenly and unmaidenly prayers appeared to be irrelevant; the Apostolic See was in no position to condemn royal lechery. More important, before the death of his elder brother made him heir to his father's throne, he had been trained to be a priest.

By the time he mounted the throne, in 1509, he could and did quote Scripture to any purpose, and after the monk of Wittenberg had posted his Ninety-five Theses on the Castle Church door, Henry had denounced him in his *Assertio septem sacramentorum contra M. Lutherum*, a vigorous defense of the Catholic sacraments, probably ghostwritten by Richard Pace, Bishop John Fisher of Rochester, or, possibly, Erasmus. In it he asked, "What serpent so venomous as he who calls the pope's authority tyrannous?" and declared that no punishment could be too vile for anyone who "will not obey the Chief Priest and Supreme Judge on earth . . . Christ's only vicar, the pope of Rome."

Luther, replying with his typical grace, referred to his critic as that "lubberly ass," that "frantic madman . . . that King of Lies,

King Heinz, by God's disgrace King of England," and continued: "Since with malice aforethought that damnable and rotten worm has lied against my King in heaven, it is right for me to bespatter this English monarch with his own filth." He then sponsored a Protestant conspiracy in the heart of London, the Association of Christian Brothers. The association circulated anti-Catholic tracts and reached its climax the year before Rome's sack with the publication of William Tyndale's famous — infamous in the Vatican — English translation of the New Testament, which made the thirty-four-year-old British clergyman an archenemy, not only of the Apostolic See, but also of his then-Catholic sovereign.

Tyndale was a humanist, and his tale is an example of the deepening hostility between men of God and men of learning. English humanists had rejoiced at Henry's coronation. Lord Mountjoy had written Erasmus of the "affection [the king] bears to the learned." Sir Thomas More said of the new monarch that he had "more learning than any English monarch ever possessed before him," and asked, "What may we not expect from a king who has been nourished by philosophy and the nine muses?" Henry's invitation to Erasmus, urging him to leave Rome and settle in England, appeared to confirm the enthusiasm of English scholars. It seemed inconceivable that the popular monarch, faced with a choice between faith and reason, should choose faith.

But Erasmus, after accepting the invitation, found that the king had no time for him. And as the religious revolution grew in ferocity, Henry's commitment to Catholicism deepened. Lord Chancellor More, with royal encouragement, imprisoned the Christian Brothers and other heretics. And the Tyndale affair, which appalled English intellectuals, seemed to align him with the most reactionary heresimachs.

William Tyndale had conceived his translation while reading ancient languages at Oxford and Cambridge, and he had begun work upon it shortly after his ordination as a priest in 1521, the year of Luther's condemnation at Worms. A Catholic friend reproached him: "It would be better to be without God's law than the pope's." Tyndale replied: "If God spare me, ere many years I will cause the boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture than you do."

Had he valued his own years on earth, he would have heeded his friend. It was one thing for Erasmus to publish parallel texts of the Gospels in Latin and Greek; few, after all, could read them. This was another matter altogether. It was actually dangerous; the Church didn't want — didn't permit — wide readership of the New Testament. Studying it was a privilege they had reserved for the hierarchy, which could then interpret passages to support the sophistry, and often the secular politics, of the Holy See.

Tyndale had been warned that finding a printer for his completed manuscript would be difficult. Luckless in England, he crossed the Channel and found a publisher in Catholic Cologne. The text had been set and was on the stone when a local dean heard of it, grasped the implications, and persuaded authorities in Cologne to pi the type. Fleeing with his manuscript, Tyndale found that he was now a police figure; had post offices existed, his picture would have been posted in them. The Frankfurt dean sent word of his criminal attempt to Cardinal Wolsey and King Henry, who declared Tyndale a felon. Sentries were posted at all English ports, under orders to seize him upon his return home.

But the fugitive was less interested in his personal freedom than in seeing his work in print. He therefore journeyed to Protestant Worms, where, in 1525, Peter Schöffer published an octavo edition of his work. Six thousand copies had been shipped to England when Tyndale was again spotted. He was on the run for the next four years. Then, believing himself safe, he settled in Antwerp. However, he had underestimated the gravity of his offense and the persistence of his sovereign. British agents had never ceased stalking him. Now they arrested him. At Henry's insistence he was imprisoned for sixteen months in the castle of Vilvorde, near Brussels, tried for heresy, and, after his conviction, publicly garrotted. His corpse was burned at the stake, an admonition for any who might have been tempted by his folly.

The royal warning was unheeded. You can't kill a good book, including the Good Book, and Tyndale's translation was excellent; later it became the basis for the King James version. Despite a lengthy *Dialogue* by More, denouncing the translation as flawed, copies of the Worms edition had been smuggled into the country and were being passed from hand to hand. To the bishop of Lon-

don this was an intolerable, metastasizing heresy. He bought up all that were for sale and publicly burned them at St. Paul's Cross. But the archbishop of Canterbury was dissatisfied; his spies told him that many remained in private hands. Protestant peers with country houses were loaning them out, like public libraries. Assembling his bishops, the archbishop declared that tracking them down was essential — each was placing souls in jeopardy — and so, on his instructions, dioceses organized posses, searching the homes of known literates, and offered rewards to informers — sending out the alarm to keep Christ's revealed word from those who worshiped him.

Henry's blows against Lutheranism and English heresy were appreciated in Rome. The king had expected them to be, and had



King Henry VIII of England (1491–1547)

let Rome know that he would welcome a *quid pro quo*. Earlier pontiffs had designated the rulers of Spain as "Catholic Sovereigns" and French monarchs as "Most Christian." Henry wanted something along that line, and Pope Leo gave it to him, bestowing upon him and his successors the title *Defensor Fidei*, Defender of the Faith. Henry ordered this struck on all English coins, and because kings rarely return anything once it is in their grasp, the rulers of England have kept the honorific ever since,* though within a dozen years of its conferral the Holy See very much wanted it back.



IN THE POPULAR imagination, Henry VIII and Martin Luther have been yoked as leaders of the Reformation, though each would have deeply resented the coupling, and in fact they do not belong together. Luther was a theological rebel. Henry remained a faithful Catholic in every particular except one. He rejected the supremacy of Rome because the pontiff — for political, not religious reasons — resisted what the king regarded a royal prerogative. There is much to be said in Henry's behalf and very little in the pope's, but the motives of both have been muddled, as often happens when romance rears its violin-shaped head.

The immediate issue was Henry's decision in 1527 to dissolve his eighteen-year-old marriage to Queen Catherine, Catherine of Aragon, the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. His motive would not be acceptable to later ages, but it was then. Medieval sovereigns were expected to function as national stallions, providing heirs for their thrones. This was particularly important in Henry's case. The dreary, thirty-one-year War of the Roses between the Yorkists and the Lancastrians had ended only six years before his birth, and his family's claim to the monarchy was shaky; if he died without male issue, England would almost certainly be ravaged by civil war again.

Unfortunately Catherine, now forty-two, had proved an incompetent conceiver of healthy boys. Her only child to survive

*"Elizabeth II, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of Her Other Realms and Territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith."

infancy was a girl. Henry knew the problem did not lie with him. In 1519 he had sired a bastard boy by his first royal mistress, Elizabeth Blount, the sister of William Blount — Lord Mountjoy, Erasmus's patron. Though adulterous, this and Henry's other affairs were sanctioned by custom; unwritten law held that when royal marriages had been contracted for reasons of state, either party might seek diversion elsewhere. But there was another consideration. Assuming that his queen would bear children of both sexes, the king had betrothed their small daughter, Mary, to the dauphin of France. Should Henry die without leaving a son, Mary would inherit the English throne, and when her husband was crowned king of France, the British island would, in effect, become a province of France.

The annulment he sought required Rome's consent, but that should have presented no problem. Papal dispensations were not uncommon; the usual procedure was to find some flaw in a marriage which would permit an annulment or a divorce. In Henry's case the flaw was genuine. Catherine was the widow of his older brother Arthur, and English canon law prohibited such a marriage, taking its precedent from the book of Leviticus (20:21): "If a man shall take his brother's wife it is an unclean thing . . . they shall be childless." The Vatican had provided a dispensation permitting Henry to wed her, but it was doubtful that the pontiff had possessed the power to overrule the scriptural ban, particularly since the queen's fruitlessness seemed to have fulfilled its prophecy. The king said that the dispensation, and therefore his union with Catherine, had been illegal. Theologians on both sides of the Channel agreed with him.

In Rome, however, the prospect of an English royal divorce bore distasteful political implications. Pope Clement was struggling to recover from the sack of the holy city, where, largely as a result of his own blundering, his situation had become highly complicated. If the pontiff agreed, he could anticipate a highly unpleasant confrontation with a ruler even more powerful than Henry: the Holy Roman emperor, whose domains sprawled across the Continent, and whose armies had now twice defeated the French in disputes over Milan, Burgundy, Naples, and Navarre. The undisputed master of Italy, Charles V literally surrounded the

Vatican and therefore was, in proximity alone, bound to intimidate any pontiff, particularly at a time when the papacy was deeply involved in regal intrigues. Clement was a captive pope, and the emperor's views would be given great weight, especially if they were strongly held.

In this case they were. Charles's childhood tutor, the future Pope Adrian, had instilled in him a solemn reverence for the Vicar of Christ. Catherine was his aunt, and he was incensed by the argument — unwisely presented to the Vatican by Henry's legate — that because she had been Arthur's widow, her marriage was not only invalid but actually incestuous. Should the Vatican accept this reasoning, she would be reduced to the level of a discarded concubine, and her daughter, Mary, England's heir apparent, Charles's cousin, would become illegitimate. If Clement denied papal permission, Henry would be blocked — unless, of course, he quit the Church, a possibility which seems to have occurred to no one except him until he had publicly committed himself. It came as a shock to prominent English Catholics, confronting them with an agonizing choice between their faith and their monarch. No one who knew Henry expected royal sympathy for their dilemma, and there was none; when the humanist Juan Luis Vives spoke up for Catherine, he was dismissed as Mary Tudor's teacher and banished from the court.

None of Henry's predecessors would have dreamed of breaking with Rome, but he was a man of immense determination, and his resolve was strengthened by his choice of, and infatuation with, Catherine's successor: Anne Boleyn, a nobly born nineteen-year-old girl remarkable for her flashing eyes, long, flowing hair, and vivacity. Here his judgment was gravely flawed. Superficially, Anne seemed qualified for the throne. The daughter of a viscount and granddaughter of a duke, she had been educated at a Paris finishing school and had served as lady-in-waiting, first to Marguerite of Navarre and then, back in England, to Catherine. She was witty and gay. But she was also flighty, self-centered, and, by all accounts, lascivious.

It was her sexuality which had attracted Henry to her. The Boleyn women were noted for their libidos; both Anne's mother and her older sister had slipped naked into the king's bed, to his

subsequent delight, but her lovemaking skills eclipsed theirs. To him this wanton girl seemed built to breed. He was convinced that once the Holy See had sanctioned a royal annulment, freeing him to wed her, crown her, and impregnate her with a scion, England would be guaranteed a future sovereign to rule an England at peace. What he did not know — then — was that despite her youth she was as experienced as he was. Before she seduced him, her many lovers had included the poet Thomas Wyatt and Henry Percy, the future Earl of Northumberland. Even in what one historian of Hampton Court describes as "exceedingly corrupt court revels," she was notoriously available to both single and married courtiers. Indeed, there is evidence that when the king designated her his queen-elect, she and Percy were already secretly married.

Because of this — and much more of the same, which was to follow — the king's decision to abandon Catherine led to the messiest divorce in history. Yet had Anne Boleyn never existed, Henry would still have found a new queen. He had begun to consider changing wives as early as 1514, when Anne was a child of seven; when he quit Catherine's bed in 1524, it was to sleep with Mary Boleyn, not her younger sister. Three more years passed before he took Anne as his mistress and made the first, tentative inquiries about a dispensation from Rome.

His hopes were vested in his lord chancellor, Cardinal Wolsey. Wolsey sympathized with the king's yearning for a son and had his own candidate for the succession, the French princess Renée, daughter of King Louis XII. Privately the cardinal was appalled by Anne. He was familiar with her reputation, and by now the king must have heard at least a whisper of it. But to a monarch with Henry's pride it would have been inconceivable that any queen of his would be tempted — let alone dare — to contemplate infidelities. Furthermore, by now he was in love with her.

Wolsey badly needed a success. Once considered invincible, the lord high chancellor was now seen as a leader of lost causes. His wars had alienated the Commons and the merchants, his dictatorial manner had offended the clergy, and his foreign policy — rejecting Charles V for a French alliance — had proved disastrous. Had he been wise, he would have been unobtrusive. Yet he could not

hide his lack of enthusiasm for what the royal court was calling "the king's great matter." Henry, impatient, bypassed the cardinal and sent his own secretary, William Knight, to Rome. Knight, speaking for his sovereign, submitted his case to Pope Clement. The pontiff, he argued, should declare Henry's present marriage invalid. In any event, he proposed, the matter should be decided in England. His Holiness agreed. Knight then suggested that an eminent prelate serve as judge and make the final ruling. He had Wolsey in mind. The pontiff knew it. He also knew that for seven months of the previous year he and his retinue had been holed up in Sant' Angelo while Rome was sacked. The troops still surrounded the city, and their commander was the English queen's



Anne Boleyn (1507-1536)

nephew. If Clement yielded to Knight's other point, he would be inviting the wrath of Charles V. Yet he could not leave the English cardinal out. Therefore, Clement ruled that *two* members of the sacred college should preside. Wolsey would be joined by an Italian cardinal, Lorenzo Campeggio. This was a stunning loss of face for Wolsey, and when Anne turned against him he was a ruined man. Henry seized his palace at Whitehall and stripped him of his secular offices. He was allowed to retain the archbishopric of York. After a year the king ordered his arrest. Ill, Wolsey died on the way to London.

In the meantime, Cardinal Campeggio had found the English sovereign immovable. "This passion," he wrote the pope, "is the most extraordinary thing. He sees nothing, he thinks of nothing but his Anne; he cannot be without her for an hour." Nevertheless Henry, willful but astute, had been proceeding shrewdly. He had appointed a commission to gather legal opinions from Catholic scholars all over Europe, and confronted the pontiff's representative with the fact that they backed him, without exception. Campeggio agreed that England deserved a fertile queen. He urged Catherine to retire to a nunnery. She agreed — provided Henry enter a monastery. The cardinal was offended. He knew she could not be serious; the thought of Henry VIII resigning himself to obedience, chastity, and poverty was absurd. What the cardinal did not realize was that Catherine's intractability, supported by her imperial nephew and his captive pope, meant that from this point forward the likelihood of England's defection from Catholicism would increase month by month.

HENRY IS OFTEN depicted as short-tempered, a man who was determined to have his way whatever the consequences. The determination was there, but in pursuing his desires he also showed remarkable patience. His reply to Luther — the work of a staunch Catholic sovereign — was written in 1521. In 1522 Anne Boleyn, aged fifteen, became a lady-in-waiting to Queen Catherine, and it was there that she caught the king's eye. He had already despaired of Catherine's infertility, but five years passed before he secretly began to seek to annul their marriage. For six years the pope, under pressure from her nephew Charles, ignored Henry's appeals.

It was in 1533 that he married Anne, now twenty-six, and was excommunicated by the pope. Parliament passed the Act of Succession in 1534; it declared the king's marriage to Catherine invalid, recognized Anne as the new queen, made questioning her marriage to Henry a capital crime, and required all Henry's subjects to take an oath of loyalty to him. Nor was the tale told. The king's disillusionment with Anne, among other consequences, lay ahead.

In the beginning the king had assumed that the pope would swiftly grant his request, dissolving his barren marriage. All precedents were on his side. Even Campeggio, who first came to London in 1528, agreed with him. But the pope, to Henry's growing frustration, seemed incapable of making up his mind. Campeggio knew how little weight an Italian cardinal carried in London. If he ruled in Catherine's favor, he would simply be banished. Therefore he appealed for instructions from the Vatican. Clement's frantic reply reflects his helplessness. He told his cardinal "not to pronounce sentence without express commission hence. . . . If so great an injury be done to the Emperor, all hope is lost of universal peace, and the Church cannot escape utter ruin, as it is entirely in the power of the Emperor's servants. . . . Delay as much as possible." By this and other byzantine maneuvers the pope bought time — five more years of it.

Eventually there was no time left to buy. Anticipating a dispensation, the king had fitted up splendid apartments for Anne adjacent to his own at Greenwich; courtiers reported to her, as though she had already been crowned; crowds gathered outside her windows, ignoring Catherine. Often Henry would not leave Greenwich until noon. But papal politics made this bedfellowship perilous. The issue became critical when Anne discovered that she was with child. Thomas Cranmer, a Cambridge theologian, had drawn up a new array of arguments; a team of negotiators, now hastily dispatched by the king, presented them in Rome. Still the pontiff hesitated. Anne was beginning to show, and no infant could succeed to the monarchy unless born to a queen.

Henry could wait no longer. He appointed Cranmer archbishop of Canterbury, invested him with extraordinary powers, and urged him to place the broadest possible interpretation on his new office. The new prelate moved swiftly, ruling that the pope was

incompetent to grant a dispensation. He declared Catherine a divorcée, secretly married Henry to his mistress, and in May 1533, on Whitsunday of her twenty-seventh year, when she was in the seventh month of her pregnancy, crowned her with great ceremony in Westminster Hall.

Nothing could stop the split in the Church now. The king's blood was up. He had already summoned a special session of Parliament. Working on the anticlerical feelings of the MPs — and despite the opposition of Sir Thomas More, his new high chancellor — he had rammed through a brutal legislative program limiting the powers of the clergy, increasing taxes on the Church, and cutting the annates paid to Rome to 5 percent. This last act was the sort of insubordination which deeply wounded the Holy See. Clement had dawdled for years over the divorce petition from London, but he had also drafted a bull excommunicating the king. Now the Vatican executed it.

The king's response was just as vehement. Following his lead, Parliament passed thirty-two religious bills, which, among other things, cut off *all* revenues to Rome, and confiscated all Church lands — by a conservative Catholic estimate, 20 percent of the land in England. Other measures suppressed monasteries, decreed that spiritual appeals by English Christians must be made to Canterbury or the king, required new clergymen to swear loyalty to the crown before they could be consecrated, and stipulated that only royal nominees could become bishops and archbishops. Then Henry took the ultimate step. In the Act of Supremacy (November 1534) he abandoned Rome completely, founding a new national church, *Ecclesia Anglicana*, and appointing himself and his successors its supreme head.

Sir Thomas More, Wolsey's successor as high chancellor, had followed Henry for a time, but he had been in agony, trapped between conflicting loyalties. More was the king's humble servant. However, he was also a devout Catholic. The less his sovereign saw of him, he reasoned, the better. Therefore he resigned the chancellorship in 1532. It was in vain. He could not hide; he was too eminent; the king was watching him closely. His personal crisis reached a climax in the spring of 1534. When the king demanded that his subjects take an oath to obey the Act of Succession,

he was asking more than More could give. It meant swearing fealty to Henry and repudiating the papacy. Most of the English clergy meekly obeyed. More didn't protest; he simply remained mute. He condemned neither the oath nor those who had taken it, but though remaining loyal to the crown in word and deed, he refused to renounce Rome — a devastating silence, because Henry was taking an enormous risk. Although he was a powerful monarch, his reign was confined to the living. England's rising national spirit supported him, as Germany's had supported Luther, but if the pope excommunicated his entire kingdom, condemning every Englishman to eternal flames, the possibility of an uprising would be far from remote. In this exigency the king could not hesitate.

More had already opposed Henry's marriage to Anne and refused to attend her coronation, a mortal insult. Any tolerance of further *lèse majesté* by Henry would be interpreted as weakness, especially since the former chancellor, garlanded with royal honors, was the most influential man in English public life. The king could be merciless or he could forfeit his crown, and for this king that was no choice. More was charged with treason and imprisoned in the Tower of London.

At his trial More finally spoke out. Splitting the Church was a tragic crime, he said; he could not, in all conscience, be an accomplice to it. Nor, he added, could he bring himself to believe that "any temporal man could be the head of the spirituality." He was one of the most eloquent men of his generation, but he spoke in a hubbub and could scarcely be heard. The hearing was a formality. The verdict had already been decided. His judges included Anne's father, her uncle, and her brother, Lord Rochford. They condemned him to be "hanged, drawn, and quartered" — the extreme penalty for betrayal of the sovereign. It meant that the chancellor's shrunken cadaver, cut into four parts, would be left to rot on the London docks.

That was too much for the king. As Anne sulked — Sir Thomas had succeeded Wolsey as the object of her malice — Henry changed the sentence to simple beheading. The scholar who had served him so faithfully went to the ax with his head high. As he mounted the scaffold it trembled and seemed about to collapse. Turning to a king's officer he said calmly, "I pray you, Mr. Lieu-

tenant, see me safe up, and for my coming down let me shift for myself." Then, altering the ghastly ritual by blindfolding himself, he asked the hushed crowd to witness his death "in the faith and for the faith of the Catholic Church, being the King's good servant, but God's first." He died. Afterward his head was affixed to London Bridge.

England was shocked. No one in the kingdom believed the former lord chancellor even capable of betraying crown and country. Erasmus mourned his friend, "whose soul was more pure than any snow, whose genius was such that England never had and never again will have its like." The Vatican proclaimed him a Christian martyr. In time the papacy beatified and then canonized him.



LESS THAN A YEAR later Anne Boleyn followed him to the block. Her thousand-day reign had been a disaster, so calamitous that the prestige of the papacy was enhanced; only divine intervention, men reasoned, could have visited such punishment upon the rebel monarch in London. His conviction that she would present him with an heir had been wrong. Her first baby, like Catherine's, was female. No one could blame her for that, but the failure of her womb was the least of it. Once on the throne she seemed to change personality. Her gaiety vanished and was replaced by temper tantrums, sharp-tongued imperiousness, and innumerable petty demands which left the king exasperated. Catherine at least had been gentle, and he began to miss that; when she died, he wept, and ordered the court to go into mourning. Anne refused. After she presented him with a second, dead child — a boy, born prematurely and badly deformed — he no longer desired her. He told friends Anne had bewitched him, and cited the baby's deformities as evidence of her sorcery. To her fury, he began sliding his hand under the skirts of one of her maids, the nobly born Jane Seymour.*

If the evidence later arrayed against her is to be believed, Anne

*Who became Henry's third wife and deserves to be remembered as one of the few genuine ladies of the age. The sister of the duke of Somerset, Jane spurned the king's advances as long as his queen lived. She asked him never to speak to her when they were alone and returned his letters and gifts unopened. Her first act as queen was to reconcile Henry and Catherine's daughter.