

When did the Schism begin, and why? Views on the English Reformation amongst Catholic polemicists.

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Abstract : For Catholic polemicists, the Break with Rome and the establishment of the Church of England did not signal the arrival of religious truth and renewal, with a clear start date and a point of completion; rather it was a schism, a breaking from the true church. Its dating and origins were intimately connected with the moral failings and lust of Henry VIII. Marian authors were able to reflect on this scenario from the position of an England restored to Catholicism, but they were bookended by those in the reigns of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, whose explanations of the English Reformation were shaped by their own experience of displacement and dispossession. This article outlines the ways in which the 'losers' of the Reformation portrayed the timing and origins of England's schism to their fellow English Catholics, and to the wider Catholic world. The potential of their narrative to puncture the myth of inevitable Protestant triumph was such that Protestant regimes in England were eager to take action against writers and their work. For contemporaries, this was not just an academic exercise in history writing; this Catholic version of the Reformation story was intended to spur on action against an illegitimate and heretical regime. Discussion of the timing and reasons for the Break with Rome could thus also be a call to arms.

Keywords: England, Catholicism, Polemic, Controversy, Reformation

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Date et cause du début du schisme : comment les polémistes catholiques percevaient la Réforme anglaise.

Pour les polémistes catholiques anglais du XVIe siècle, la rupture avec Rome et la création de l'Eglise d'Angleterre, loin de représenter l'avènement de la vérité et du renouveau, ni même

un processus avec des bornes chronologiques claires, étaient au contraire vues comme un schisme et une rupture avec la vraie Eglise. Pour eux, les défaillances morales et la luxure d'Henri VIII expliquent les origines du schisme.

Cet article apporte un éclairage sur la manière dont les perdants de la Réforme ont décrit les origines du schisme anglican à leurs co-religionnaires anglais et européens. Leur lecture de ces événements allait à l'encontre du récit conventionnel protestant qui décrivait l'inévitable triomphe du Protestantisme. La force de ce récit alternatif était telle, que les régimes protestants se sont évertués à interdire ces écrits et en punir leurs auteurs. Ceux-ci ne pensaient pas faire purement œuvre d'historien, l'interprétation catholique de l'histoire de la Réforme était destinée à encourager la résistance contre un régime illégitime et hérétique, celui d'Elisabeth Ière. La réflexion sur les causes et les origines de la Réforme pouvait donc aussi servir d'appel aux armes.

Mots clés : Angleterre, catholiques, polémique, controverse, Réforme

The English Reformation lacks the great iconic 'starting point' of its German counterpart. Whilst debate continues about whether Luther did actually nail his 95 theses to the door of the *Schlosskirche* in Wittenberg, and about its significance for Luther's contemporaries, as Peter Marshall argues, for Protestants, particularly Lutherans, it became a powerful symbol of Luther's stand for religious freedom of conscience, and of resistance to the corrupt power of an institutional Church.¹ In Protestant narratives, Luther was inspired by religious revelation and driven to search for doctrinal purity, and his posting of the theses could be seen as a turning point. Compare this to the series of rather muddled events that make up the early Reformation in England, which, by many accounts, was an act of state as much as a search for theological reform.² Henry VIII had offered a public rebuke to Luther, and argued for the authority of the Church, earning himself a papal title of Defender of the Faith. Within a few years, however, he rejected Papal authority, and created a separate Church of England, over which he claimed headship. English evangelicals were thus working in a context where immediate political, dynastic and personal motivations were contributing to the King's move away from the Church of Rome.

And yet, looked at from an angle which emphasises the personalities involved, there is perhaps more to link Luther and Henry VIII, and their roles in their respective 'national' Reformations, than we might first assume. Some time ago, Thomas Betteridge pointed

¹ Peter Marshall, *1517: Martin Luther and the Invention of the Reformation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.

² Ethan Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 29.

towards the marital situation of both men, and suggested that this might be construed not only as unorthodox, but as morally dubious, thus casting doubt on the ‘purity’ of the respective reformations. Henry’s desire for Anne Boleyn, which drove him to the Break with Rome, might be considered as somehow comparable to Luther’s attack on the Church, which enabled another unorthodox relationship: his marriage, as a former Augustinian canon to a former nun, Katherine Von Bora.³ Martin Luther’s Reformation was critiqued by Catholic opponents in terms of Luther’s dubious morality, but, as Andrew Pettegree argues, they lost the polemical battle in the face of overwhelming evangelical success in print.⁴ In England, however, English Catholic opponents of Henry VIII and his royal supremacy continued to stress the personal failings of the monarch, and continued to do so beyond Henry’s own lifetime. This article seeks to trace the ways in which English Catholic writers articulated this view of the Break with Rome and subsequent Reformation, over a period of roughly fifty years. It will focus on three key texts, written and circulated at three different points: as Henry’s break with Rome happened; during the regime of Mary I which returned England to the Roman Catholic Church; and several decades into the reign of Elizabeth I, as some sought to revive plans for the armed restoration of Catholicism. Whilst the specific circumstances faced by the writer(s) inflected each text with a different emphasis, they might be united by their common interpretation of the origins of the English Reformation lying in irreligious personal weakness of the monarch.

It is perhaps unsurprising that English Catholics, as the ‘losing’ side in the English Reformation, developed their own vocabulary in which to describe the monumental changes that they were witnessing, or that they saw in their very recent past. The Break with Rome and the Royal Supremacy were not recognised as the, or even a, ‘Reformation’, a term whose current usage would not have been familiar to contemporaries.⁵ Nor was it ‘reform’, which was something that should happen within the Church, not in opposition to and separation from it. For Catholic writers, the changes enacted in the reign of Henry VIII added up to schism. Henry’s actions were on one level shockingly without precedent, but they might also be framed in terms familiar to the Catholic Church, an opportunity that contemporary opponents of Henry’s royal supremacy took up. It allowed them to have a framework within which to compare the present with earlier schisms, and also provided a means to warn of the dangers presented by changes in the present day. Moreover, schism remained a relevant

³ Thomas Betteridge, *Tudor Histories of the English Reformations, 1530-83*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 1999, p. 121.

⁴ Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: How an Unheralded Monk Turned His Small Town into a Center of Publishing, Made Himself the Most Famous Man in Europe – and Started the Protestant Reformation*, New York, Penguin, 2015, p. 214-224, p. 226.

⁵ Christopher Highley, “‘A Pestilent and Seditious Book’: Nicholas Sander’s *Schismatis Anglicani* and Catholic Histories of the Reformation”, *Huntingdon Library Quarterly*, 68.1.2, 2005, p. 151-171, here p.152, n.3. This article is indebted to Highley’s work on Sander, and to his discussion of the term schism.

concept for those Catholic writers considering Henry's Break with Rome from the other end of the century. The exiled cleric Nicholas Sander's most famous work, first published in 1585 and discussed further below, was entitled: *De Origine ac progressu schismatis Anglicani* (*The Origins and Progress of the English Schism*).⁶

Depending on the broader context two different readings might be made of the English Reformation as schism. A more optimistic approach might note that whilst there was no knowing how long this particular schism might last, there had been schisms before, and the church had survived. A schism was also potentially reversible, given the right circumstances, so Henry, or, later on, his successors might be able to reverse some of the damage that had been done.⁷ In contrast, the more pessimistic view stressed the very real danger that schism caused and could perpetuate: the presence and the spread of heresy, which posed a spiritual threat to all subjects of the Tudor Crown. Allowing some to question the structure and the doctrine of the Church opened the door for others to do so, and thus for further souls to fall into error and separation from Christ.⁸ And, for a theologian like Reginald Pole, discussed below, schism and heresy were not separate categories, but intimately related.⁹ Perhaps what was most disappointing for these writers was that the schism, with its dire spiritual threat, was completely avoidable, were it not for the King's actions.¹⁰

This article will discuss some of the ways in which some English Catholic writers across the Tudor century made sense of the beginning of England's Reformation. It needs to be acknowledged of course, that not all Catholics responded in the same way to the Break with Rome and the dilemma presented to them by the Royal Supremacy.¹¹ The focus here is on those who chose to openly articulate their disagreement, and to voice and encourage opposition. Within these writings, one particular theme emerges: locating the Break with

⁶ Nicholas Sander, *De Origine ac progressu schismatis Anglicani* (Reims, 1585).

⁷ When writing *De Unitate*, Pole points towards a hopeful resolution – that the King will repent, and that England will not be lost. A significant part of Book IV of *De Unitate* was directed towards this specific purpose: persuading Henry to repent and do penance. This point is discussed below.

⁸ For a useful discussion of the perceived relationship between schism and heresy, E. Shagan, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁹ E. Shagan, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

¹⁰ Elsewhere, vocabulary that was less strictly ecclesiastical might be used to articulate the illegitimacy of the Break with Rome. Richard Verstegan, the exiled author, publisher and intelligence agent reported plans for a comprehensive history of the English Church in the 1580s. In this context, the Break with Rome was discussed as 'The Revolt of King Henry Eight' - an action that overturned established order, associated with anarchy and the removal of good society. Richard Verstegan, *The Letters and Despatches of Richard Verstegan (c.1550-1640)*, ed. Anthony G. Petti, *Catholic Record Society*, vol. 52, 1959, p. 134. This letter is also discussed in C. Highley, *op. cit.* p. 151.

¹¹ Lucy Wooding, *Rethinking Catholicism in Reformation England*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2003.

Rome and the Royal Supremacy in the King's immorality and lust. In tracing this theme of illegitimacy and personal immorality, two key considerations will be emphasised. Firstly, whilst the authors covered here wrote in the knowledge of and in engagement with previous work, the specific circumstances of Henrician, Marian and Elizabethan Catholics differed, leading to subtle variations in emphasis and articulation of the argument: the circumstances for Reginald Pole soon after the Break with Rome were different to those of Nicholas Sander in the 1570s and 1580s, for example. Secondly, given the subject of their arguments – the way in which, and the reasons why, England was removed from the international community of the Catholic Church – it is unsurprising that some at least wrote for an international as much as for a domestic audience. The behaviour of an individual monarch within England had profoundly international consequences, and was, as scholars have recently shown, a point of considerable interest, concern and discussion for England's neighbours.¹²

Reginald Pole's *De Unitate*: the Foundations of the Literary Opposition to Henry VIII

The foundational text for those that followed the route of open opposition to the English Reformation was Reginald Pole's *Pro ecclesiasticae unitatis defensione (Defence of the Unity of the Church)*, often referred to as *De Unitate*.¹³ Pole, a member of one of the highest-ranking noble families in England, wrote from self-imposed exile in Italy, while refusing to answer royal demands to return to England to participate in discussions relating to emerging religious policy. Pole was addressing Henry directly, to advise about the legitimacy of Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon and the papacy as a divinely established institution.¹⁴ Completed sometime after the King's demand for Pole's response, *De Unitate*, contended that Henry's break from Rome, and assumption of the Royal Supremacy was, as Anne Dillon puts it, "constitutionally and spiritually illegal."¹⁵

In Pole's eyes, Henry's assumption of supreme headship was outrageous. To claim a power that pertains only to the Pope, who acts in the place of Christ, amounted to a rejection of Christ. Whilst his focus was less on the specific moral crimes of his monarch, Pole's work nevertheless prepared the ground for the more scandalous commentaries that were to appear

¹² For example, for the Spanish reaction to the Break with Rome, Peter Marshall, "England's Other Black Legend: The Henrician Reformation and the Spanish People", *English Historical Review*, 116, 2001, p. 31-49.

¹³ Reginald Pole, *Pro ecclesiasticae unitatis defensione* (Rome, 1537-1538). This was published without Pole's permission, prompting him to publish an alternative version in 1539. Anne Dillon, *Michaelangelo and the English Martyrs*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2012, p. 73-74.

¹⁴ T.F. Meyer, "Reginald Pole", in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22456?docPos=1> (accessed 13 May 2017).

¹⁵ Anne Dillon, *Michaelangelo and the English Martyrs*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2012, p. 65.

in the reign of Elizabeth I, as we will see below. Henry was informed by Pole that his decision to reject Catherine of Aragon, his wife of over 20 years, was driven by his “lamentable passion” for Anne Boleyn.¹⁶ Turning to biblical example, Pole dared to suggest the analogy of King Achab, corrupted by his wife Jezabel. Achab, Pole told Henry, had been “alienated... from the true worship of God just as it now clear that a new Jezabel has turned your mind away from the truth.”¹⁷ This association of Jezabel with Anne Boleyn, and later with her daughter Elizabeth, was one that other Catholic polemicists were also to put to vigorous use.¹⁸

Pole told Henry that the consequences of his disordered passion were to lead to political, and more importantly, spiritual corruption not only for him, but for his subjects and his realm. Just as Catherine of Aragon had expressed concern over the peril threatening the kingdom, a peril which was inherent in the King’s campaign for an annulment and remarriage, Pole conceived the danger arising from his rejection of Rome as a profoundly spiritual matter.¹⁹ In this interpretation, Henry’s disordered desire for another woman was to lead a whole kingdom into spiritual catastrophe. Henry’s decision to claim that his longstanding marriage to Catherine was invalid, led to his unprecedented and appalling claim to headship of the Church of England, “this new dignity which you have just taken, which no one before had usurped.”²⁰

De Unitate defended those Catholics recently martyred by Henry, and the cause for which they had died – the defence of the Catholic Church, and of Papal supremacy.²¹ This marriage between an attack on royal presumption and an honouring of the martyrs was to be repeated in later Catholic works, including that of Nicholas Sander, discussed below. Profoundly affected by the campaign launched against his family in his absence, Pole’s attitudes in *De Unitate* were to be vindicated at the news of the death of his elderly mother at the hands of the king. Pole thus subsequently thought of and referred to himself as the son of a martyr, and

¹⁶ Reginald Pole, *De Unitate*, cited by W. B. Patterson, “The Recusant View of the English Past”, in Derek Baker (ed.), *The Material Sources and Methods of Ecclesiastical History: Papers Read at the Ecclesiastical History Society*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1975, p. 249-262, here p. 251.

¹⁷ Cited in C. Highley, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹⁸ Discussed in C. Highley, *op. cit.*, Katy Gibbons, *English Catholic Exiles in Late Sixteenth-Century Paris*, Woodbridge, Boydell and Brewer, 2011, p. 85.

¹⁹ Peter Marshall, “Is the Pope Catholic? Henry VIII and the Semantics of Schism”, in Ethan Shagan (ed.), *Catholics and the ‘Protestant Nation’: religious politics and identity in early modern England*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005, p. 22-48, here p. 28.

²⁰ Translation taken from W. B. Patterson, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

²¹ A. Dillon, *op. cit.*, p. 68 and following. Dillon observes that Pole’s ‘thesis of martyrdom’ in *De Unitate*, is unique, stressing the validity of their stand in defence of papal supremacy and against the Royal Supremacy. A. Dillon, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

the sense of shock at the regime's treatment of an older noblewoman was to do much to build the King's reputation as a tyrant.²² Nevertheless, from his perspective in the 1530s, Pole was not commenting on a past that was decided, but on a present where things were still profoundly unsettled. He was not speaking to a reading public – or at least initially he was not explicitly doing so – but instead was addressing the king directly. On one level this makes the strength of his condemnation even more striking. Peter Marshall has recently described the work as “a call to repentance and a declaration of war, thinly disguised as a peace offering”.²³ Pole's sense of outrage at the King's appropriation of titles that were not his to take led him to present Henry with a dramatic, polarised view of himself: “To everyone you appear more cruel than any pirate, more bold than Satan himself. Truly, then, you were such a terrible enemy to the Church that you can be compared with no-one but Satan.”²⁴ Despite this, Pole retained a hope that the situation could improve, and that England, and its king, were not permanently lost spiritually. The first step back onto the right path was for the King to take, and Pole urged him to “do penance!”.²⁵ True repentance on the part of the King would mean that everything was not lost, and that the realm would not be given over completely to heresy. Writing as events unfolded in England, an outright condemnation of Henry's actions could coexist with an acknowledgment of possibility for change, for the reassertion of the traditional ecclesiastical and theological status quo. Importantly, Pole's words, daring as they were in the 1530s, were not just isolated to an ivory-tower context of intellectual argument, protected by his absence from England. Ethan Shagan has shown that within England, some sense of the Break with Rome as a heretical outrage was also being voiced on the ‘popular’ level, by clergy and laity.²⁶ Moreover, they were to have a longer term influence, as we will see: those Catholics writing about the events of Henry's reign from the later Tudor period did so in the knowledge of Pole's work.

The recent past from a triumphant present? Marian writers/texts and their views of Henry's Reformation

The accession of Mary to the throne following Edward's death in 1553 offered Catholics new hope for the future of the kingdom. Whilst the official return to the jurisdiction of the Pope was not realised until 1554, the Queen's first proclamation of her religious policy made clear

²² A. Dillon, *op. cit.*, p. 109-110.

²³ Peter Marshall, *Heretics and Believers: A History of the English Reformation*, Yale, Yale University Press, 2017, p. 236.

²⁴ Reginald Pole, *Pole's Defence of the Unity of the Church*, trans. Joseph C. Dwyer, Westminster, Maryland, 1965, p. 270-271, cited by E. Shagan, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

²⁵ R. Pole, *op. cit.*, p. 298, cited by T. Betteridge, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

²⁶ E. Shagan, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

the intended direction, including the return to Rome, and in some parts of England the Catholic mass was celebrated even before it was legal to do so.²⁷ Reginald Pole, the dispossessed exile under Henry VIII, now returned as Cardinal Pole, Papal Legate to England and a vital element of England's return to Catholicism. His *De Unitate* was to appear in print for the first time in 1555, soon after his attainder was removed, and he addressed Parliament to announce England's readmission to the Holy See. Pole's interpretation of the Break with Rome, written in the very different circumstances of the 1530s, could be read anew in the 1550s, in the light of Mary's succession and the realm's return to Catholicism.

Marian writers commentating on the beginnings of the Reformation were faced with some thorny issues. How might they encompass the Protestant Reformation of the previous two reigns within an explanatory schema that emphasised Mary's legitimacy as Henry's daughter, and the continuity she provided for the Tudor dynasty? As Thomas Betteridge observes, the regime were confronted with a paradox: they needed to explain "its relations to the immediate past as being simultaneously discontinuous from and as depending on it for meaning".²⁸

There was a strain of Catholicism within the Henrician Church, re-emerging under Mary, that sought to reconcile a 'Catholic' identity with loyalty to the monarch as the Head of the Church of England.²⁹ In this context, continuity with Henry was a powerful argument: Mary was not only Henry VIII's lawful successor, she was also the inheritor and protector of his Church. Eamon Duffy has observed how, in its early days, the Marian regime was keen to emphasise its connection with 'good King Henry', instead presenting the more emphatically Protestant period under Edward as the aberration.³⁰ In this sense perhaps, not having an unambiguous turning point within the narrative of the English Reformation may have been an advantage. The changes under Henry might be viewed as somehow less destructive and disruptive than what came under Edward. And yet, the origins of the schism did lie with Henry, and for Mary's supporters, it took the succession of his eldest daughter and rightful heir – who had of course, been rejected when the King was most deeply fallen into schism, to restore England to its place in the Catholic fold. Whilst it benefitted the regime to stress this continuity in certain aspects, however, other Catholics were not afraid to challenge this narrative, and stress instead the discontinuity and rupture inherent in Henry's policies. Following on from Pole's example, they pursued in their writing the idea that the Break with Rome was to be deplored as the result of Henry's personal lust. One way to articulate this line without courting danger for themselves, though, was to suggest Henry as a victim. In this

²⁷ Robert Tittler and Judith M. Richards, *The Reign of Mary Tudor*, Harlow, Pearson, 2013, p. 31.

²⁸ T. Betteridge, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

²⁹ For the changing meanings and applications of the term 'Catholic', see P. Marshall, 'Is the Pope Catholic?', *art.cit.*, p. 22-48.

³⁰ Eamon Duffy, *Fires of Faith: Catholic England Under Mary Tudor*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010, p. 37.

sense he might be seen in a more traditional mode, as a potentially good king lead astray by bad advisors, who in this case took the shape of the evangelicals surrounding him, and more prominently, the charms of Anne Boleyn.

For example, the anonymous author of one Marian text, *Life of John Fisher*, pinpointed the king's ending of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon as the "verie Springe from which so many lamentable & miserable tragedies have spronge."³¹ Here, it seemed, the legal and constitutional events of the English Reformation, including the actions of Parliament were less chronologically important than the royal divorce. The ending of Henry's legitimate marriage, however, was to be regarded as merely the worldly manifestation of something that God had chosen to let happen – that his people should be tried by the entry of the Antichrist into the world.³² In this sense, the unfolding of events was in divine hands – God, not the King, was in charge of chronology.

Other Marian texts appeared to focus less on the wider theological causes of the King's Break from Rome, and devoted more attention to his individual human weakness: here, lust was identified as the cause of Henry's illegitimate actions. To give one example, George Cavendish's life of his master Thomas Wolsey, was particularly clear on this point. His *Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey*, written some twenty-five years after Wolsey's death, clearly had its own specific agenda. Cavendish states that he was present and a witness to much of what he narrates, thus putting himself in a strong position to offer a rebuttal of false claims about Wolsey's behaviour. In his preface, he notes that since Wolsey's death "I have heard sundry surmises and imagined tales, made of his proceedings and doings which I myself have perfectly known to be most untrue."³³ Cavendish's project to defend Wolsey's reputation touched directly on the question of the King's divorce and Break with Rome. He sought to reject the suggestion that Wolsey was the chief protagonist in a plot to end Henry and Catherine's marriage. Moreover, Henry is seen to publically acknowledge that Wolsey had opposed, rather than promoted, a divorce.³⁴ Whilst defending his old master, Cavendish nevertheless had to offer an explanation for England's fall from the Catholic Church, and for this he returned to an explanation offered by other Catholic writers. The severing of the age-old connection between the Kingdom of England and the Church of Rome, was, Cavendish told his readers, the result of something closer to home: the king's lust for Anne Boleyn. From Anne, all disorder, heresy and instability emanated. Anne's corruption was writ large upon the nation – but the king himself had a direct part to play, not least if rumours were to

³¹ Cited in T. Betteridge, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ George Cavendish, *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey*, ed. G. H. M. Simpson, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1905, p. 7.

³⁴ Discussed more fully in R. H. Britnell, "Penitence and Prophecy: George Cavendish on the Last State of Cardinal Wolsey", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 48.2, 1997, p. 263-281, here p. 264-265.

be credited about Anne's parentage. Suggestions about the King's previous relationships not only with Anne's sister, but also her mother, were contemporary to the King's Great Matter; Cavendish was reiterating them for a later audience rather than inventing them himself, when he claimed: "The kyng fantasied so much his daughter Anne that almost everything began to grow out of frame and good order."³⁵

Christopher Highley has suggested that statements about Anne's status as Henry's daughter did not appear in manuscripts or printed texts intended for a wide audience until Nicholas Sander's work, discussed below.³⁶ Cavendish's life of Wolsey was not a print 'best seller' comparable to Elizabethan texts that attacked the Henrician supremacy, but we can certainly see this allegation about Henry being presented to an English audience by the middle of the century. Whilst Cavendish's work appears to be less 'impactful' in its treatment of the Reformation than those printed works which preceded and succeeded it, it nevertheless explicitly engaged with some of the same explanatory frameworks.

As hinted above, Cavendish offers an interpretation that connects the moral ruin of a monarch with the ruin of his kingdom:

there is no one thing that causeth them [princes] to be more wilfull than carnal desire and voluptuous affection of foolish love [...] for what surmised inventions have been invented, what laws hath been enacted, what noble and ancient monasteries overthrown and defaced [...] and what alterations of good and wholesome ancient laws and customs hath been forced by will and willful desire of the prince, almost to the subversion and desolation of this noble Realme and all men may understand what hath chanced to this region.³⁷

Cavendish's support for his former master is clear: he had specific personal motivations for his account of Henry's divorce, but, on some levels his interpretation does not stray too far from that of other Catholic writers. Although his work remained in manuscript until the seventeenth century, there is evidence for its resonance with contemporaries. Several copies of contemporary manuscripts survive, and other Tudor writers, such as John Stow, drew upon it in their work.³⁸ Its use of English limited its audience to within the Tudor realms for the

³⁵ G. Cavendish, cited by T. Betteridge, *op. cit.*, p. 127. For George Throckmorton in 1532 telling Henry 'it is thought that ye have meddled with both the mother and the sister', see Jennifer Loach, "George Throckmorton", rev. Joseph H. Block, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/38067?docPos=7> (last accessed 13/05/17).

³⁶ C. Highley, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

³⁷ G. Cavendish, *op. cit.*, p. 69-70.

³⁸ A. S. G. Edwards, "George Cavendish", in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4933?docPos=9> (last accessed 13/05/17). Betteridge certainly

most part, although some of Cavendish's interpretation was shared by later printed texts which did speak to a continental audience.

Resisting the Settlement and Working for the Mission?

Those Catholics contemplating the reign of Henry VIII from the latter part of the sixteenth century did so from a context that had once more changed dramatically. Mary's providential succession, and the return of England to Rome was not a permanent prospect. A few decades into Elizabeth's reign, it was clear that Catholic hopes for rapprochement, and for the queen's marriage to a Catholic prince, accompanied by toleration for her Catholic subjects, were not to materialise. A large-scale rebellion, and several international projects for an armed re-Catholicisation of the kingdom had been unsuccessful in overturning the Protestant regime. However, the failure of attempts at regime change by the mid-1580s had done nothing either to allay the fears of the Protestant government, or to dampen the hopes of some Catholics, within and beyond England, about its possibility in the near future.

The 1580s onwards saw a flurry of polemical activity. The Protestant press were keen to persuade the public of the continued reality of an international Catholic plot to which English Catholics would give their support, while Catholic writers overseas answered their enemies and persuaded their coreligionists of the rightness of their cause. Much of these battles in print were focused on the immediate issues at hand, including for example the scurrilous and entertaining attack on the queen's favourite, *Leicester's Commonwealth*.³⁹ But the recent history of the Reformation was not far from the minds of Catholic polemicists. For Nicholas Sander, a very prominent English Catholic intellectual, the history of the Reformation in England took centre stage in an argument for action in the present day. His interpretation of the Reformation was to prove particularly controversial, and, significantly, particularly widespread amongst England's neighbouring states.

The Latin text based on Sander's work, *De Origine ac progressu schismatis Anglicani*, published in Rheims in 1585, "became the source for Catholic interpretations of English

considers Cavendish's life as the work of a Marian writer: T. Betteridge, *op. cit.*, pp.126-30, ff. For more detail on manuscript copies, see *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey by George Cavendish*, ed. Richard Sylvester, Early English Texts Society, London, 1959, esp. Appendix E.

³⁹ *The Copie of a Leter, wryten from a master of arte of Cambrige to his friend in London* (?Reims/Paris, 1585). For more on this text, Peter Lake, *Bad Queen Bess? Libels, Secret Histories and the Politics of Publicity in the Reign of Elizabeth I*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, see especially chapter 5; and K. Gibbons, *op. cit.*, chapter 3.

history on both sides of the Channel in the sixteenth century and well into the nineteenth”⁴⁰. It was to undergo more than 10 editions within the same number of years, and was to be the inspiration for other accounts of the English Reformation in European vernaculars.⁴¹ Sander, a cleric deeply engaged in the Counter-Reformation in Europe as well as England, was also an advocate of forced regime change in Elizabeth’s kingdoms. His manuscript, incomplete on his death in 1581, was adapted and expanded by another exiled cleric, Edward Rishton. It also received significant input from two of the most senior figures in the English Catholic community, the secular priest and later Cardinal William Allen and the Jesuit Robert Persons.⁴²

De Origine stressed the long history of England’s membership of the international Catholic Church: for almost a thousand years, England, and its people, had been Roman Catholic.⁴³ The reason for the abrupt and disastrous break with this heritage, was, it claimed, Henry’s determination to gain a divorce, driven by his disordered appetite for Anne Boleyn.⁴⁴ Henry began as a promising king, displaying many of the characteristics of a good monarch, and even earning the papal title of Defender of the Faith. His downfall lay in his tendency to “levity and wantonness.”⁴⁵ In contrast to Queen Catherine’s “soberness and “modesty,” the king’s weaknesses allowed for an immoral court, creating an opening for Anne Boleyn to exert influence. In this sense, to date the ‘origins’ of the Reformation would be to identify when this corruption entered the royal court, rather than pinpointing a particular political or jurisdictional event or development. *De Origine* was unequivocal in identifying Henry’s

⁴⁰ Freddy Christobal Dominguez, “‘We Must Fight With Paper and Pens’: Spanish Elizabethan Polemics, 1585-1598”, PhD Thesis, Harvard, 2011, p. 20. Dominguez’s thesis, and forthcoming book, provide a wealth of new insights.

⁴¹ Heal notes 15 different editions in 10 years. Felicity Heal, “Appropriating History: Catholic and Protestant Polemics and the National Past”, *Huntingdon Library Quarterly*, 68. 1-2, 2005, p. 109-132, here p. 113.

⁴² F. Dominguez, *op cit.*, p. 29-30.

⁴³ Felicity Heal observes that the historical approach taken in *De Origine* tended to break with an earlier approach by Catholic writers to avoid the history genre, as history might be seen to meddle in political matters, at a point where they were arguing for their political loyalty to the Protestant Crown. ‘...only as the mission became more directly confrontational would the political uses of the past prove more attractive’. F. Heal, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

⁴⁴ Interestingly, the first 1585 edition allowed some room for acknowledging the potentially positive elements of Henry’s personality; but the 1586 edition, produced for a Spanish audience, was much less inclined to qualify its condemnation of the King. F. Dominguez, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁴⁵ Nicholas Sander, *Rise and Growth of the Anglican Schism*, ed. David Lewes, London, Burns and Oates, 1877, p. 11.

obsession with Anne as the sole driver behind his campaign to end his first marriage, and eventually to his denial of Papal authority:

He gave up the Catholic faith for no other reason in the world than that which came from his lust and wickedness. He rejected the authority of the Pope because he was not allowed to put away Catherine, when he was beaten and overcome as he was by the flesh.⁴⁶

And it was from this action that all other elements of Henry's Reformation proceeded:

He destroyed the monasteries, partly because the monks, and especially the friars resisted the divorce; partly because he hungered after the ecclesiastical lands, which he seized that he might have more abundant means to spend in feasting on women of unclean lives, and on the foolish buildings he raised.⁴⁷

There was no room for any suggestion of religious motivation on the part of the king. As the King sinned, he gave licence for subjects to do the same, and to deny the Pope:

Then was heard everywhere, out of every mouth who was living a corrupt life, that the Pope had nothing to do with the kingdom of England, unless it pleased the King to allow him authority in it; for, said they, every soul must be subject to the royal power, not only in civil but also in spiritual things. All, this, it is true, was invented maintained and scattered abroad for the purpose of keeping people from imagining that the king had got rid of his wife without lawful authority.⁴⁸

De Origine was probably most infamous for emphasising the relationship between Henry and Anne as incestuous, stressing that Anne was Henry's daughter from his previous relationship with Anne's mother. This claim was not of Sander's invention, but picked up from earlier texts, including that of George Cavendish, as noted above.⁴⁹ Sander, however, was more outspoken and more detailed in his condemnation, and more determined to articulate this view to a wider audience. *De Origine* insists that Henry, who had falsely claimed torments of conscience over the legitimacy of his marriage to Catherine, then married Anne in the full knowledge that she was his daughter: "Henry was in no doubtful way that Anne Boleyn was his own child, and yet he married her [...]. This was rashness not to be believed, hypocrisy unheard of, and lewdness not to be borne".⁵⁰ There is no sense here of Henry as a good king corrupted by evil counsellors: he is choosing to make his daughter into his wife. Whilst, as

⁴⁶ N. Sander, *op. cit.*, p. 162

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ N. Sander, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁴⁹ See above, n. 35.

⁵⁰ N. Sander, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

Peter Lake observes, in later editions of *De Origine* the actions of ‘Lutherans’ in advancing the Reformation is acknowledged, it is nonetheless Henry’s decision to reject Rome and claim a spiritual authority for himself that enabled them to act.⁵¹

Importantly, Sanders and his editors were not just looking backwards to write the history of where the monarchy had gone wrong vis-à-vis the true Church. They were also commenting on their present, and exhorting contemporaries to action. By understanding Henry’s Reformation in a particular light, vital lessons could be learnt, and Elizabethan Catholics could be led to understand their duty to act in the present. Given the text’s insistence on the incestuous and immoral nature of Henry’s relationship with Anne, the legitimacy of Elizabeth was openly questioned. In other senses, though, Elizabeth was portrayed as the heir to Henry’s godless Reformation and Break with Rome. Just as Henry had proceeded to marry Anne despite knowing he was her father, so too, Sander tells his readers, did Elizabeth know what she was doing when she set the Church in England on a path that lead away from Rome: “The Catholic religion could not have been set aside at that time but for the cunning of the queen.”⁵² The limits of this article do not allow for a more in-depth discussion of the depiction of Elizabeth in *De Origine*. It is worth noting however that Elizabeth, the editors’ own current queen, was presented even more negatively than her father. Her sins and actions against the Catholic faith were confirmation of the long-lasting consequences of Henry VIII allowing his lust to overtake all other priorities.⁵³

De Origine stood out amongst contemporary polemic for the unrelenting nature of its attack on the weak, corrupt, and unkingly, or unqueenly, nature of the Tudor monarchs, with the exception of Mary. We have learnt much more about the context and uses of the text thanks to work of Freddy Dominguez and Peter Lake. And yet, as Dominguez points out, whilst the origins of the schism were seen to lie with Henry VIII and his disordered appetites, *De Origine* was also clear that English Catholics themselves were complicit. They had allowed the break with Rome and royal supremacy to happen, and failed to resist the growth of heresy.⁵⁴ Whilst attacking the Tudor monarchs, then, *De Origine* also chastised fellow Catholics, ruling out any compromise with the Elizabethan authorities: there could be no legitimate compromise with an illegitimate, heretical queen or the regime that maintained her. This approach was in line with one strain of Elizabethan Catholic thought regarding their

⁵¹ P. Lake, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

⁵² N. Sander, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

⁵³ For discussions of the take on Elizabeth’s reign, see P. Lake, *op. cit.*, F. Dominguez *op. cit.*, and C. Highley, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

⁵⁴ F. Dominguez, *op. cit.*, p. 35-36.

position under a heretical monarch - that no form of negotiation or compromise with that regime, or with the Church of England, was acceptable.

Thus recent history and contemporary commentary was put to work as a call to action, through the polemical print project, and through the attempts at an armed invasion of England. These aims chimed with those of Pole in the 1530s, and in the mid-1580s, there was still momentum from within English Catholic circles to continue to pursue this agenda. A work like *De Origine*, as Dominguez has shown, could be adapted and pitched to make the maximum impact possible. A written appeal, on an international stage, aimed at a readership able to influence opinion within Philip II's empire, and to some extent, within Henri III's France, looked not only to rouse English Catholics to action, but to secure backing for armed restoration from patrons on the continent.⁵⁵ Sander himself was to embody this impulse, producing some of the most famous anti-Elizabethan polemic, and also throwing himself into an attempt to overturn the Elizabethan regime in Ireland, just as the first Jesuit mission landed in England.⁵⁶

De Origine was a lengthy work, which combined immediate gossipy detail from contemporaries with a larger schema to explain and understand England's drift from the true church, brief return to Rome and then further descent into a corrupt Protestant regime. Its view of the recent past was closely related to urgent arguments in its Elizabethan present, whilst also having a much longer term influence on how English Catholics were viewed by Protestants, and on how Catholics on the continent might understand the situation in England. It picked up on earlier interpretations of Henry's Break with Rome and Royal Supremacy, explored the consequences of this for England, and issued a call to arms to reverse a religious revolution driven by one monarch's lust.

Understanding the English Schism – an international matter?

When celebrating the Catholic succession of Mary in his drama, the Marian writer John Proctor has the character of 'England' note its recent notoriety in an international context: "I was example to the whole worlde of all disorder, impietie and heresie."⁵⁷ Whilst the Break with Rome and the Royal Supremacy in England was different in some respects to Reformations in continental Europe – Protestant leaders were appalled at Henry's claim to have spiritual authority over 'his' church – it was nevertheless a significant event for England's neighbours. The presentation of the English schism by contemporaries and near

⁵⁵ F. Dominguez, *op. cit.*, p. 113-165 gives a fascinating and insightful account of how different editions were specifically angled to appeal to particular audiences at particular moments in time.

⁵⁶ Gerard Kilroy, "Paths Coincident: The Parallel Lives of Dr Nicholas Sander and Edmond Campion, S.J.," *Journal of Jesuit Studies*, 1, 2014, p. 520-541.

⁵⁷ John Proctor, *The historie of wyattes rebellion*, cited by T. Betteridge, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

contemporaries took place on a stage which stretched beyond the Tudor kingdoms. This sense of having an international audience for their interpretations of the dramatic changes experienced within England ran through the works of Catholic writers – both those discussed here, and others. The ability to use the printing press was crucial in setting their sights on a large international audience.

Pole's *De Unitate* was initially oriented as an epistolary answer to Henry, although Pole went on to produce prefaces for copies addressed to the Emperor Charles V, James V of Scotland and Francis I of France. Anne Dillon also points towards a later preface, written in 1552 for the consideration of Edward VI.⁵⁸ Whilst there was no immediate rush into print for *De Unitate*, Pole's arguments about the illegitimacy of the Break with Rome were too important not to be made known to Henry's fellow monarchs. A printed version of *De Unitate* followed in 1539, partly in response to Protestant attempts to enlist Pole's work for their own ends.⁵⁹ Pole's text had a ready international market, in manuscript, and then in print.⁶⁰ It still had resonance some fifty years later: a 1587 edition in Ingolstadt meant that Pole's contemporary judgement from the 1530s reappeared at the same time as Sander's historical verdict was newly circulating.

In contrast, the 'Marian' texts discussed above were originally written in, and remained, in English, and in manuscript. In part, their authors envisaged a different audience for their discussions. This is not to say that some of their interpretations of the Reformation were unknown to their continental counterparts – far from it, as the case of Pole's *De Unitate* confirms. Rather they were aiming to provide English Catholics in England with a way of understanding what had happened to their church in the earlier part of the century. In theory, they had the practical possibility of English language printing in a supportive 'home' environment, something that later Catholic commentators could not benefit from. And yet the most notable Marian treatments of the Break with Rome and Royal Supremacy remained in manuscript.⁶¹ Although circulation in manuscript could still be significant, in the case of

⁵⁸ A. Dillon, *op. cit.*, p. 72-73.

⁵⁹ A. Dillon, *op. cit.*, p. 74. Interestingly, the hostile Protestant author here was not an Englishman, but an Italian, Pier Paolo Vergerio – another implication that Pole's arguments were being made, and heard, in an international context.

⁶⁰ Universal Short Title Catalogue, <http://ustc.ac.uk/index.php> (accessed 24 October 2017). Excluding the Venetian publication of Pole's preface, which had malicious intentions, other editions of *De Unitate* are recorded in the USTC as being published in Rome, Ingolstadt and Strasbourg. An edition was also published in English in 1560, claiming to reveal the 'seditious and blasphemous oration of Cardinal Pole both against god and his country which he directed to themperour in his booke intituled the defence of the ecclesiastical unitye, moving the emperour therin to seke the destruction of England and all those which had professed the gospel'.

⁶¹ C. Highley, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

Cavendish's *Life*, at least, the lack of printed version is nevertheless noteworthy.⁶² It is perhaps consistent with the general lack of religious polemic produced in print during Mary's reign. As Alec Ryrie has recently observed, Mary and Pole viewed religious controversy as something to be carried out "carefully, behind closed doors, not through the megaphone of the printing press. The wider reading public was expected to learn, not to argue."⁶³ Whilst recent scholarship has shown how aspects of the Marian regime were presented in print for an international audience, the more controversial issues of recent history, and of the origins of the Reformation, remained mostly confined to manuscript.⁶⁴ The manuscript format and use of English could have a direct impact on the Queen's subjects in England, but perhaps did not have the 'reach' of other printed projects.

In contrast, during Elizabeth's reign, easy access to a printing press within England was denied to Catholic writers. However, by the 1580s, Catholic authors could benefit from well developed links with the European printing industry, and a lively demand for such work, both within England and across Catholic Europe. Significantly, Sander's editors, like Pole, did not publish in English, but in Europe's *lingua franca* of Latin. Only a year after its first appearance in 1585, another Latin edition was produced in 1586, with some important alterations to the text to appeal directly to a Spanish readership, when English Catholics were pushing for Spanish backing for an enterprise of England.⁶⁵ Within a year, this was followed by two French translations, and one Spanish version. Translations into German, Italian, Portuguese and Polish also appeared.⁶⁶ Here the sorry tale of Henry's fall into debauchery and irreligion, bringing ruin to himself and leading his subjects away from the true church, could be put to use in different ways for different audiences, as Dominguez has so skilfully shown.⁶⁷

Notably, it was only England that lacked its own vernacular version of *De Origine*, although Highley notes that there were plans for an English translation in 1596.⁶⁸ The lack of a printed English edition was perhaps due to both political and practical reasons: the strength of its condemnation not only of Henry VIII, and, indeed of Elizabeth; but also the difficulty by the 1580s of English-language printing of Catholic material, at least within England. English Catholic polemicists were reliant on continental printing presses, and for them a lengthy Latin

⁶² For more detail on manuscript copies, see above n. 38.

⁶³ Alec Ryrie, *The Age of Reformation: the Tudor and Stewart Realms 1485-1603*, 2nd ed., Abingdon, Routledge, 2016, p. 172.

⁶⁴ Corinna Streckfuss, "England's Reconciliation with Rome: a News Event in Early Modern Europe", *Historical Research*, 82, 2009, p. 62-73.

⁶⁵ F. Dominguez, *op. cit.*, p. 75 and following.

⁶⁶ W. B. Patterson, *op. cit.*, p. 252; C. Highley, *op. cit.*, p. 154

⁶⁷ F. Dominguez, *op. cit.*, see in particular chapter 3.

⁶⁸ C. Highley, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

or European vernacular publication was a more viable prospect than one in English. The use of Latin, in any case, was common for English Catholic publications in a range of genres, and located *De Origine* firmly within a European market.⁶⁹ The international reach was in keeping with what was envisaged within *De Origine* itself. It was in the enterprise and constant efforts of Catholics overseas that hope for a different future partly lay.⁷⁰ The use of Latin did not completely exclude an English reading audience as there is evidence that copies of the Latin text were circulating within Elizabeth's kingdoms.⁷¹ However, its message, with some adaptations, spoke directly to European Catholic audiences as much as it did to English readers. By exploring the origins of the Reformation in England, Sanders and his editors examined not only where the King, but also his Catholic subjects had gone wrong. This exploration of past sins, was not just a lesson in past mistakes, but a spur to action in the present. Henry's sins may have prompted the Break with Rome and subsequent schism, but the ensuing godlessness and moral ruin, in which other English Catholics had a part, was to be corrected by action in the present day. Any project to overthrow Elizabeth would be dependent on foreign aid – from Philip, the Pope, or from Catholic factions in France – so a call to arms had to appeal to this crucial constituency.

Conclusion

The 'losers' of England's Reformation, or at least its Break with Rome had to grapple with a profound sense of loss, and attempted to explain how England had fallen into schism seemingly so easily. In explaining the beginning of the Reformation, its opponents focused not on theological or ecclesiastical events so much as Henry VIII's personal failings. In one sense, they, as their Protestant opponents, claimed that the Break with Rome and Royal Supremacy made the Reformation in England distinctive from the growth and spread of Protestantism in continental Europe. England was exceptional, but perhaps not in the ways that Protestant writers claimed. Highley emphasises the observation in *De Origine*, for example, that heresies in neighbouring territories were introduced and maintained by "popular tumults," but in England the situation was brought about purely at the monarch's command.⁷² What for royal propagandists was the transition to correct belief and practice, for Catholics who refused to conform to the royal supremacy was schism, a schism for which Henry VIII was responsible. Commenting on current events, or on recent history, they

⁶⁹ In his early years in exile, Sanders published a few works in English; after 1568 all his works were in Latin. Thomas McNevin Veech, *Doctor Nicholas Sanders and the English Reformation*, Louvain, Bibliothèque de l'Université, 1935, p. 89.

⁷⁰ N. Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

⁷¹ C. Highley, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

⁷² C. Highley, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

concentrated on this explanation of the origins of the English Reformation, in the process downplaying the role of religious inspiration on the part of the evangelicals, and overlooking the role of Parliament. Whilst the brief return to Rome in Mary's reign offered Catholic writers the opportunity to rejoice, they still sought explanations which might not have sat easily with the immediate political situation. This context changed again with Elizabeth's succession. Religious politics and international relations had moved on since the 1530s, becoming more rather than less complex by the end of the century, but Catholic commentators returned to the connected themes of lust and illegitimacy in their presentations of the English Reformation, presentations that were as important internationally as they were for a 'domestic' audience. For these Catholic writers, answering the 'why' question about the origins of the Reformation was in some senses more important than the 'when'. They had no one great pivotal event to act as their frame of reference, or rather they chose not to see one. In some ways this worked in their favour, as it allowed them to deny the possible impact of evangelical teaching, and to cast the legislative changes under Henry less as significant turning points in themselves, and more as the consequence of a King led by his own moral failings into godless action.