

## CHAPTER 5

### Historical context

### The Reformation in England

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**The reign of Henry VIII.** **Henry VIII** (1509-1547) continued his father's policy both at home and abroad; he relied on the support of the middle class and made little use of Parliament, though recognizing its constitutional prerogatives. He improved the administrative system and concentrated on the executive power in his hands. The day-to-day government was carried on by the Council, but its members were, almost exclusively, chosen by the king. The «Justices of the Peace», local bodies existing since the time of Edward III, became more attached to the Council and during Henry's reign their functions and powers increased enormously.

Deeply interested in trade, Henry built the strong navy which was to prove useful to future generations. Henry VIII's main concern in foreign policy was to prevent any European country from becoming excessively strong. He and his Chancellor **Cardinal Wolsey** (c. 1473-1530) admirably succeeded in keeping balance, supporting the one or the other European nation, according to the exigencies and exploiting the rivalries existing between them.

England had usually supported Spain against France, but the **Battle of Pavia** (1525) caused a shift of balance: Spain which had become master of Italy, together with the Hapsburgs, was at the time powerful enough to dominate Europe. So Henry and Wolsey reverted their policy and began to gravitate towards France. But at this point Henry VIII was confronted with two different problems: he had married Catherine of Aragon, and a Spanish wife was an obstacle to his new policy; moreover, during his six years of marriage he had had no heir, except Princess Mary. Though female succession to the English throne was possible, there were no precedents, and the future of the Tudor dynasty still remained uncertain. Divorce seemed to Henry the only way of securing an heir and he applied to Pope Clement VII. But the Pope,

after the sack of Rome, was virtually a prisoner in the hands of the powerful Charles V, the nephew of Catherine of Aragon, and, after a long delay, Clement VII rejected the king's request. Cardinal Wolsey, who had treated the problem with the Pope, found himself in the strange situation of being both the King's Chancellor and the Pope's Legate. Forced to support the Pope's refusal, he was arrested on charge of treason. He died just in time to avoid execution.

**The Six Wives of Henry VIII:** it is well known that Henry VIII had six wives: **Catherine of Aragon**, his brother Arthur's widow; **Anne Boleyn**, maid of honour to Catherine, married in 1533, mother of Princess Elizabeth and executed for adultery in 1536; **Jane Seymour**, maid of honour at the court, died soon after giving birth to Edward VI in 1538; **Anne of Cleves**, a Protestant princess, whose unattractiveness combined with political reasons induced Henry to divorce her; **Catherine Howard**, who, like Anne Boleyn, was executed on charge of unfaithfulness; **Catherine Parr**, who married the king in 1542 and had the distinction of outliving him.

Then Henry VIII, on instigation of his chief advisers **Thomas Cromwell** and **Thomas Cranmer**, appealed to Parliament. In seven years Parliament passed a series of Acts culminating in the **Act of Supremacy** of 1534. The English Church separated from Rome, the king was made its **Supreme Head**, and it was no longer part of an international organization, but was part of the apparatus of the State. Shortly afterwards the **Succession Act** declared the marriage of the king with Catherine invalid and Henry was free to marry **Anne Boleyn** (the second of the **Six Wives of Henry VIII**).

In 1536 the break with Rome was completed with the dissolution of the monasteries: their enormous properties and wealth were transferred to the Crown, which distributed them to its supporters or sold to nobles, merchants and groups of speculators, who, in their turn, resold the lands to small landowners and farmers. This led to the creation of a large and influential class, who had their own interest in preserving the new order of things and also showed a political masterstroke, to secure **Reformation**.

As we have seen, the Reformation was effected by a small group, the king and his counsellors: it was not by far a popular movement, but the corruption of the clergy, the unpopularity of the Church and the cessation of the large revenue paid to Rome made it generally welcome. Though the Reformation was not without opposition: in

fact, political and religious personalities (the most famous of whom was **Thomas More** → Literary context, Prose) refused to recognize the king's supremacy and the invalidity of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon.

Shortly after the Reformation, **two parties** were formed: one led by Thomas Cromwell (c. 1485-1540; executed on charge of high treason) and Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), aiming at inducing the king towards Protestantism; the other under **Bishop Gardiner** (c. 1490-1555) and **Bishop Bonner** (1500-1569), which wanted no doctrinal change beyond the denial of the Pope's supremacy.

However Henry VIII's opposition to Rome was rather political than religious and the main Church doctrines and services were never really called into question. The king himself had always been wary of accepting the «heretic» ideas of the most radical reformers: in 1521 he had even been awarded by Pope Leo X the title of «Defender of the Faith» for his attack on the doctrine of Martin Luther.

In 1539 the **Bill of Six Articles** was issued: it confirmed Christian beliefs and worship forms. For the rest of his life Henry VIII regarded himself as a pious catholic whose religious creed had not been interfered with the break with Rome.

**Edward VI and his Protectors.** Henry VIII died in 1547 and left a **Council of Regence** to govern during the minority of his son **Edward VI** (1547-1553), who at the time was only nine. Edward Seymour (c. 1506-1552), **Duke of Somerset**, was appointed **Protector of the Realm**. In this period, under the leadership of an unscrupulous and predatory group, who had greatly benefited from the dissolution of monasteries, the Reformation was pushed towards **Protestantism**. An evidence of it was *The Book of Common Prayer*, containing a revision of the liturgy effected by Thomas Cranmer and other theologians, issued in 1549.

Edward exerted no real power during his short reign and his uncle Somerset concentrated all the State affairs in his hands. Though «the Protector» was bent to the most discreditable intrigues, he felt a genuine desire to remedy the misery caused by the enclosures, which had reduced a great part of arable lands to pasture depriving the peasants

of their means of subsistence. His provision to appoint a Commission to inquire into the evasion of the laws against enclosures was bitterly resented by the nobles. When Somerset hesitated in suppressing the **Norfolk Revolt** in 1549, he was replaced by John Dudley (1502-1553), **Duke of Northumberland**, who made alliance with the most extreme Protestant party.

As Northumberland realized that Edward was seriously ill, he convinced the Council to exclude both Mary and Elizabeth from succession and to appoint **Lady Jane Grey**, a granddaughter of Henry VII, as lawful heir; then he married her to his son. When Edward VI died in July 1553 Northumberland proclaimed Lady Jane Grey queen of England.

**Bloody Mary.** At Edward's death, Princess **Mary** took refuge in Norfolk, where she received help and support from every part of the country. The sympathy and the hopes of the nation were all concentrated on her. Northumberland's followers refused to fight, and the Duke, his son and Jane Grey, whose reign had lasted nine days, were executed.

Mary became queen of England (1553-1558) without opposition; her first steps were to marry Philip of Spain and to reconcile with Rome through a «supplication» sent to the Pope by Parliament. But her marriage with the Spanish king was unpopular, because the huge class of merchants and tradesmen were used to regard Spain as their commercial rival and the most dangerous enemy. Moreover, in the existing European balance, Mary's marriage kept England under the close control of Spain, destroying the cautious policy of her predecessors.

Mary's religious faith, combined with the lack of political judgement, made her intentioned to restore Catholicism, but the Reformation had reached a too advanced stage to be called back without danger. So **Queen Mary**, despite her good intentions, and also ill advised by her counsellors, found herself involved in a series of persecutions which characterized her reign and gained her the nickname of **Bloody Mary**. All the old laws for burning heretics were revived: the most famous victims of her persecutions were **Bishop Latimer** (1485-1555) and **Archbishop Cranmer**, but they included a great number of obscure men, such as weavers, artisans

and small farmers. The upper class escaped persecution thanks to their ability of professing any faith favourable to their interests.

The connection with Spain in 1557 led to a war against France, the result of which was the loss of Calais, that had been in English hands for almost three centuries. The loss was particularly resented by the merchants, who had always opposed Spain. By that period Mary's persecutions had also begun to alarm the upper class. Discontentment had increased to such a point that the country was on the edge of a revolution, when Mary died in 1558.

### CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF EVENTS

**1492** Discovery of America by Christopher Columbus.

**1509-1547** Reign of Henry VIII: 1533 → The king married Anne Boleyn; 1534 → Act of Supremacy.

**1547-1553** Reign of Edward VI: 1549 → *The Book of Common Prayer*.

**1553-1558** Reign of Mary: 1553 → Reconciliation with Rome; 1558 → Loss of Calais.

## Literary context

### Renaissance Humanism

The **Renaissance** (→ Glossary) began in Italy in the 14th century, then it spread to other European countries during the 15th and 16th centuries. The event, from which the movement started, was the capture of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453. A great number of Byzantine scholars took shelter in Europe, particularly in Italy, and their migration favoured the diffusion of the Greek language and of ancient works. European scholars, in search of new sources of inspiration, became deeply interested in the study of classical civilization. This movement was called **Humanism** (→ Glossary) or study of *humanae litterae*. Scholars drew from the «renaissance» of the classical learning a different kind of truth, not resting on divine authority and revelation, but derived from the nature of man himself. This led to a new conception of man which contemplated both the spiritual and active sides of

life in a freer intellectual environment. Scholars and thinkers realized that the new ideas could no longer be contained in the medieval Scholastic philosophy and an innovating revolutionary force invested all fields of knowledge and gave new impulse to arts. Under the influence of the Renaissance, science began to be considered independent from theological and dogmatic interferences, and the deductive method was replaced by the direct observation of nature. History was regarded as an accurate report of men's actions rather than evidence of Divine Will. In politics, the idea of authority based on Divine Right declined in favour of the modern notion of authority based on the agreement of peoples. The new ideals spread in England towards the 16th century, late in comparison with other European countries such as Italy and France. It was due to the social and political unrest following the War of the Roses, and then to the effects of the Reformation, which obstructed the full expansion of the Renaissance. Protestant reformers welcomed the collapse of **scholasticism** (→ Glossary) and of the medieval culture, but rejected other ideas such as the cult of beauty. Though the Renaissance stimulated a new and free activity of the mind, it was not without a certain resistance and, in comparison with other European countries, England remained more attached to its past. The literary production of the period reflects a deeper gravity, an intense care for questions of faith and conduct, and the lack of the typical serenity of the pagan world.

**The society.** Medieval society was organized in a strict **hierarchical order** (→ Glossary): the Pope and the Emperor were the greatest authorities, and every man had a definite place in it. Religion had a prominent role: medieval knowledge was contained in the «Holy Scriptures» and in the «Scholastic philosophy», and the most authoritative guide to Christians were the *Gospel* and the *Bible*.

In that kind of society, thought and free activity were checked and confined to the boundaries of **dogma** (→ Glossary) and institutions. This inevitably caused interior conflicts and contrasts which became more evident in the last stage of the Middle Ages, when a series of forces and factors contributed to alter the old balance. The expansion of trade and the growth of the towns destroyed the feudal economy and deeply affected the social and political institutions. Other relevant factors were scientific progress and geographical discoveries, such as

the **voyage of Christopher Columbus** (→ Glossary) to America in 1492. These events changed the ways of life and altered the view of the universe as well as man's position in it.

**The language.** 16th century English was much more modern than Medieval English, though its grammar and vocabulary still retained archaisms. The great development of prose, above all the translation of the *Bible* into English in a simple and popular language, avoiding both Latin and French words, greatly contributed in giving a modern form to English and spreading it among the people.

## 1) Poetry

The revival of poetry was largely influenced by **Humanism**, especially by the **Italian Renaissance**. Two courtier poets, **Wyatt** (1503-1542) and **Surrey** (1517-1547), during the reign of Henry VIII undertook the task of adapting Italian models to English poetry.

Sir Thomas Wyatt travelled to France and Italy; he deeply felt the influence of the Renaissance and introduced the «Petrarchan sonnet» into England. Wyatt gave the **sonnet** (→ Glossary) the form of an octave and a sestet separated by a pause and, by degree, he obtained fluency and sweetness. His sonnets were rich in metaphorical and subtle images; the themes were generally hopeless love and jealousy.

Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, was a victim of Henry VIII; accused with his father, the Duke of Norfolk, of high treason, he was committed to prison and executed. Surrey gave the sonnet its purely English form, less elaborate than the «Italian sonnet». His sonnet consisted in three quatrains with different rhyme, followed by a couplet. But Surrey's greatest merit was the introduction of the **blank verse** in his translation of *Book II* and *IV* of Virgil's *Aeneid*. By temperament Surrey was a man of the Middle Ages, still attached to chivalric and courtly love traditions; the lines

**Blank verse:** line of ten syllables, or «heroic verse», without rhyme; it became the most common metre used in English dramatic and narrative poetry since the mid-16th century.

he wrote during his imprisonment, in which he recalled his life, evoke a lively picture of the life of a young noble.

The works of Wyatt and Surrey were issued in 1557, in the collection *Tottel's Miscellany* by a publisher called Richard Tottel. But their influence was not immediate: it took a whole generation before their initiative began to be followed.

The literature of the period did not produce outstanding works; it was more remarkable for the new trends that it expressed. The only poet who left memorable verses, between Surrey and the advent of Spenser (→ Chapter 6, Great Writers), was **Thomas Sackville** (1536-1608), the author of *Induction*, the introductory poem and most famous part of *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1563). It was originally a collection of nineteen tales, which in the course of successive editions was brought to ninety-one. Each tale relates the life of some great figures in English history. In comparison with similar work, for example Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*, Sackville's characters are above all English and they testify the increasing English patriotism. The most interesting part of the poem is that containing the description of a Dantesque journey to hell. Moreover, Sackville is the author, with **Thomas Norton** (1532-1584) and others, of *Gorboduc* (1561), a drama in «blank verse», generally considered the earliest English tragedy.

## 2) Prose

### Humanists

Between the years 1490 and 1520, English scholars became interested in **Humanism**; a group of them visited Italy to learn Greek from Byzantine exiles. The most famous were **William Grocyn** (c. 1446-1519), **Thomas Linacre** (c. 1460-1524) and **John Colet** (c. 1467-1519); on their return to England they established a school to teach Greek at Oxford, and the Dutch scholar Erasmus (1466-1536) came from the continent to learn from them.

**Erasmus**, born in Rotterdam, was the most famous European humanist. In 1509 he wrote in Latin the *Encomium Moriae* (*Praise of Folly*), a



satire on the society of the time depicting the cruelty of kings, the greedy and ignorance of the clergy, and the foolish standard of education.

The most outstanding figure of English Humanism was **Thomas More** (1478-1535). He studied at Oxford University and at Lincoln's Inn in London; he became a brilliant lawyer, but was also devoted to literature and philosophy. His reputation attracted the attention of Henry VIII, who in 1529, after the fall of Cardinal Wolsey, appointed him Lord Chancellor. But, at the time of Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon, More, who could not agree with Henry's position, resigned his office. In 1534 he was called to take an oath of allegiance to the king, and after his refusal, he was committed to the Tower of London and executed. Thomas More was canonized four hundred years after his death as a martyr of the Roman Catholic Church.

His best known work is *Utopia* (1516), written in Latin and modelled on Plato's *Republic*; the title is a Greek word meaning «nowhere». It is about an imaginary island, where the natural goodness and wisdom of men triumph over the evils of the society of the time. *Utopia* stands for an ideal world of justice, peace and learning. Communism is the law of the land; the inhabitants are neither unemployed nor overworked, they hate war and soldiers, enjoy complete religious tolerance and lead a pleasant life. In this work More rejected all medieval beliefs and summed up the values of the Renaissance.

The author wrote in English *The History of King Richard III* (1514), giving the tyrant the lively picture which later inspired Shakespeare.

## Educationists

Together with the humanists, a group of writers developed: they drew inspiration from the classical world, but they wrote in English and were called «Educationists».

**Sir Thomas Elyot** (c. 1490-1546) wrote *The Booke named the Governour* (1531), dedicated to King Henry VIII, the first educational treatise in English, addressed to the future rulers of England.

**Roger Ascham** (1515-1568), a Protestant who hated the Rome of his days but admired the writers of ancient Greece and Rome, is the

most popular among Educationists. He wrote *Toxophilus* (1545), a treatise about **archery** (→ Glossary), to keep the tradition of the English national weapon alive. In his work *The Schoolmaster* (published in 1570), Ascham expressed his view on the teaching of Latin and Greek.

***The Book of Common Prayer:***

it is one of the major works of English literature. Since its introduction in the mid-16th century it has exerted enormous influence on the religious and literary lives of all who speak the English language. *The Book* has gone through a number of editions, not only in England where it originated, but in all the places where the various Churches of the Anglican Communion are now active.

**Thomas Wilson** (1524-1581) in his work *The Art of Rhetoric* (1553, 1560) recommended the use of a pure language and simple forms and derided those of his contemporaries who affected complicated forms and archaic words.

The English prose received a great impulse from the translation of the *Bible*. In 1525 **William Tyndale** (c. 1494-1536) published a translation of the New Testament at Cologne. It was followed by **Miles Coverdale's** (1488-1568) translation of the Old Testament and, in 1549, by the compilation of *The Book of Common Prayer*.

## Questions

### 1. What kind of policy did Henry VIII carry out?

- a) He continued the policy of his father
- b) He opposed his father's policy
- c) He gave the executive power to Parliament
- d) He mainly carried out foreign policy
- e) He supported Spain against France

### 2. Pope Clement VII rejected Henry VIII's request for divorce. Was this the only cause of the English Reformation?

- a) Yes
- b) Not the only, but the most important
- c) No, it was a more complex process
- d) No, the Church was already unpopular for its hostility towards England
- e) No, Henry VIII wanted to be the head of the English Church

### 3. In which way was the Reformation carried on under the reign of Edward VI?

- a) It was completed with the Bill of Six Articles
- b) It gave birth to the Act of Supremacy
- c) It was followed by the creation of monasteries
- d) It was carried on with the Succession Act
- e) It was pushed towards Protestantism

### 4. What characterized Mary Tudor's reign?

- a) The conquest of Calais
- b) Her Protestant faith
- c) The country's discontent
- d) Her fierce persecutions against heretics
- e) Her reconciliation with France

**5. What values did the Renaissance exalt?**

- a) The respect of divine authority
- b) A free activity of mind
- c) A dogmatic conception of human life
- d) The deductive method
- e) The renewal of ancient beliefs

**6. Did the ideals of the Renaissance develop in England later than in other European countries?**

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) The opinions are controversial
- d) They developed at the same time
- e) The first ideals of the Renaissance were born in England

**7. Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, devoted themselves to a particularly literary task. What was it?**

- a) The revival of Italian archaic forms
- b) To create a new English model
- c) To imitate Classical models
- d) To evoke courtly love traditions
- e) To adapt Italian models to English poetry

**8. Who was considered as the most eminent European humanist?**

- a) Thomas More
- b) John Colet
- c) Erasmus
- d) Thomas Linacre
- e) William Grocyn

**9. Thomas More's *Utopia* depicts an ideal society. On what principles was it based?**

- a) On the principles of Communism
- b) On medieval beliefs

- c) On a stern and rigorous regime
- d) On the philosophy of Aristotle
- e) On the supremacy of Catholicism

**10. Which writers of the time were the translators of the Bible, giving a new impulse to English literature**

- a) Thomas Wilson and Thomas Elyot
- b) Thomas Sackville and Thomas Lynacre
- c) John Colet and William Grocyn
- d) William Tyndale and Miles Coverdale
- e) Roger Ascham and Thomas More

### Answers and explanations

1. Answer: **a)**. Henry VIII continued the policy of his predecessor. Like his father, he aimed at the establishment of a steady monarchy and adopted a series of measures to improve the administrative system and to concentrate on the power in his hands. Henry VIII, too, relied on the support of the middle class to check opposition and to make little use of Parliament.
2. Answer: **c)**. Besides the Pope's refusal, other factors contributed to make the Reformation well accepted in England, though it was not without opposition. The Church of Rome had become increasingly unpopular: the English people, heavily taxed for centuries by the agents of the Papacy, resented that a large part of the national wealth was sent to Rome and that a clergy depending upon the Pope's authority could exert their influence on English questions.
3. Answer: **e)**. Edward VI's reign was too short and the king had no time to exert real power. His uncle, the Duke of Somerset, appointed «Protector of the Realm», governed the country during his minority. In this period *The Book of Common Prayer* was issued and the Reformation was pushed towards Protestantism.

4. Answer: **d**). As soon as she became queen of England, Mary restored Catholicism and reconciled with Rome. Led only by her religious faith, she did not realize the dangerous effects that a sudden reverse of policy could produce on the country. The revival of the old laws for the burning of heretics gave rise to a series of ill directed persecutions. Prominent Protestants such as Bishop Latimer, Archbishop Cranmer and a great number of obscure victims lost their lives. This gained the queen the nickname of «Bloody Mary».
5. Answer: **b**). Above all the Renaissance exalted the free activity of mind as a reaction against the strict boundaries imposed by the medieval beliefs. A free activity of mind and a new conception of man, contemplating both the spiritual and the active sides of life, promoted a wider and deeper investigation in the scientific, philosophic and political fields. In literature the clear and harmonious classical world was regarded as the most suitable source of inspiration.
6. Answer: **a**). In comparison with other European countries, the Renaissance developed later in England. The spreading of the new ideals was delayed by the contrasting trends set up by the Reformation.
7. Answer: **e**). Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, undertook the task of adapting Italian models to English poetry. Wyatt introduced the «Petrarchan sonnet» in England and gave it an English form, a form which was revised and perfected by Surrey.
8. Answer: **c**). Erasmus, born in Rotterdam, was the most famous humanist of the time. In his work *Encomium Moriae* he satirized the vices and the shortcomings of contemporary society.
9. Answer: **a**). More's *Utopia* marks a kind of society to which all men aspire, where the natural goodness and wisdom of men triumph over the evils that spoil society. The principles on which it is based are those of an elementary Communism; but political concepts and implications are replaced by an appeal to good sense and best human qualities. The work expressed the spirit of the Renaissance and exerted a wide influence.
10. Answer: **d**). English prose received a new impulse from the translation of the *Bible* started by William Tyndale and completed by Miles Coverdale.