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<https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/53>

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THE PLAN FOR REFORMATION: HENRY VIII AND THE DISSOLUTION OF
THE ENGLISH MONASTERIES

By

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B.A., Brescia University, 2003

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of the University of Louisville
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of History
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2005

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A Thesis Approved on

April 26, 2005

by the following Thesis Committee:

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ABSTRACT

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Angela L. Ash

May 14, 2005

This thesis is a critical examination of the dissolution of the monasteries under the reign of Henry VIII, and the key role the dissolution played in his plan for the Reformation in England. In addition, the present study found that by closely studying certain documents, we gain an understanding of Henry VIII's strategy and attitude that was also important to his plan for initiating reform in the 1530's. Though there is a complete analysis of several of the most relevant scholars, the present study builds upon the theories and assertions of these experts with unique suggestions in reference to frequently cited documents, as well as a discussion of primary source material that has not been cited by leading scholars. These documents lead to an advanced understanding of Henry VIII's motives and attitude, and the concerns he had as the monarch that began the Reformation in England.

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CHAPTER I

ENGLAND'S DIVE INTO THE REFORMATION

In 1534, Henry VIII made the decision to separate his country and himself from the Catholic Church, thereby making one of the most subversive acts by a monarch in English history. The Reformation in England has since been the topic of considerable discourse, inviting unlimited interest about the changes effected by the event. One of the most drastic alterations was the dissolution of the monasteries, which began in stages, but was completely accomplished by 1540. Though some might question the importance and the role the monasteries played in sixteenth-century England, these institutions had existed for centuries and were familiar, if not wholly endeared, to their respective communities.¹ Their elimination incited reactions on behalf of the people, which were swiftly addressed by both the king and those who had reason to side with the crown. While the importance of the monasteries as a valuable church establishment has been questioned, it is clear that destroying the monasteries played a crucial role in Henry VIII's plan for the Reformation in England. In addition, certain evidence suggests that Henry VIII had a clear motivation for doing so, and his harsh treatment of those who came out against the dissolution of the monasteries reveals his unrelenting

¹ J.J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publishers, 1984), 68.

attitude.² All of the evidence included in this research certainly suggests that dissolving the monasteries played an important part in Henry VIII's plan for Reformation.

Henry VIII's plan for Reformation had both political and personal designs. His initial goal was securing an heir to the throne, and since his wife in 1533 could not provide him that, and the pope would not end their marriage, Henry found another way.³ Through the added legitimacy of an act of parliament, he placed himself at the head of the Church of England and could then pursue his desire to produce an heir. Henry wanted to secure the Tudor line, and strengthen his own power as king of England. These two elements formed the basis of his entire plan for Reformation: securing his family line, and consolidating his power as king. When Catholic Church authority was removed from England, it then became necessary to remove one of the most influential of its institutions, which were the monasteries. Dissolving the monasteries became part of the plan for Reformation, since the monasteries were a formidable remnant of Catholic authority. If the king's power was to be reinforced, and his subjects loyal to him as head of the Church of England, then the monasteries had to be dissolved.

As the *fidei defensor*, King Henry VIII had been a model Catholic monarch, charging against such Protestant leaders as Martin Luther. However, by the 1530's, personal and political ambition fueled his desire for reform, which directly affected the lives of his subjects. His desire to end his marriage to Catharine of Aragon would not be arranged by the pope, which necessitated such a

² Christopher Haigh, *Reformation and Resistance in Tudor Lancashire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 109.

³ Carolly Erickson, *Great Harry* (New York: Summit Books, 1980), 208-11.

drastic action as severing all ties to the Catholic Church. In 1534, the *Act of Supremacy* was passed through parliament, and Henry VIII proclaimed himself supreme ruler over the Church of England and pursued a course of powerful legislation that would secure this change, including the dissolution of the monasteries.⁴ In just a few years, cherished traditional religious elements were eliminated - such as the monasteries, shrines, relics - making a pilgrimage was forbidden, and paying any homage to the pope was declared treasonous. But the monasteries were exceptional in that they were symbolic strongholds of the old religion and that Henry VIII, in his own intrinsic desire for control, found them to be particularly threatening institutions that also proved valuable, once they were dissolved and their assets liquidated. However, it is odd that, even though Henry VIII remained extremely anti-Protestant throughout his life, he advocated and allowed very anti-Catholic policies to be delivered under his reign, the most blatant of which was the dissolution of the monasteries. But this process did not develop overnight, and only through a series of calculated steps were the monasteries eliminated.

We can trace the development of monastic dissolution in England to the passing of the *Act of Supremacy*.⁵ The act placed the king at the head of the church, and thereby equipped him with the authority to do what he wished in regard to religious matters. Without such complete sovereignty, certainly dissolving the religious houses would not have been possible. As a Catholic country, under papal

⁴ Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie, eds., *The Beginnings of English Protestantism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1.

⁵ Denis R. Janz, ed., *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 285-6.

authority, any attempt to dissolve the monasteries would have proved futile, or at least, extremely difficult. The *Act of Supremacy* can be viewed as the justification for any facet of the Reformation in England, including the dissolution of the monasteries. And while it was parliament that enacted these changes, we must remember that they were initiated by the king and were the product of his concern for securing an heir.

The next steps taken in the direction of monastic dissolution include the *Act of First Fruits and Tenths* of 1534, the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535, and the published works of the crown's investigative duo, Dr. Thomas Layton and Mr. Richard Legh, whose letters concerning the monastic houses are collectively known as the *Compendium Compertorum*. The *Act of First Fruits and Tenths* gathered a portion of the clergy's income for secular purposes, and while the plan for dissolution may not have been completely designed at that particular time, it is an example of the trend that developed of the financial exploitation of the church. The *Valor Ecclesiasticus* was an investigation launched to gather information about church property. This census of monastic lands was the logical prerequisite for dissolving the monasteries, since it created documentation that conveyed the wealth the crown stood to gain through dissolution. The letters from Dr. Layton and Mr. Legh paint a particularly negative image of the monasteries, and they describe them as houses of sin in their many letters to Cromwell.⁶ Whether their findings were accurate or premeditated can never be known for certain, but it is generally believed that Cromwell, the king's Vicar-General, advised Dr. Layton and Mr. Legh to find

⁶ G.H. Cook, ed., *Letters to Cromwell and others on the Suppression of the Monasteries* (London: John Baker Publishers, Ltd, 1965).

fault with the monasteries.⁷ By portraying the monasteries negatively, the king had further justification to dissolve them. These letters make the monasteries of England seem incapable of performing their function as havens of spirituality and Christian guidance. Their findings would be the final step before the Henrician government began dissolving the religious houses, but the complete dissolution was accomplished with two separate acts of parliament.

The first *Act for Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries* was issued in 1536, and only eliminated those houses whose annual income did not exceed 200 pounds. Scholars cite the actual number of monasteries dissolved in this first act as anywhere from 200 to 300, but an exact number is not known due to cases of poor documentation. Nevertheless, the smaller religious houses were forced to dissolve, and those who resided in them had the option of taking a home at another larger, more wealthy monastery, or relinquishing their vows and living secularly. Regardless of how earnest the Henrician government was about the dissolution, there were several individuals that chose to openly oppose the changes that were undertaken. Some of them even organized and participated in the famous Pilgrimage of Grace, led by Robert Aske, in the same year the lesser monasteries were dissolved.⁸ Aske and others were appalled by the harsh actions taken by their king, and feared for their country's spiritual and moral security, though their concerns were not answered. Aske himself suffered execution for his leadership of the rebels, and Henry VIII issued stern statements to the towns of Yorkshire and

⁷ Roy Midmer, *English Mediaeval Monasteries 1066-1540* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979), 26-27.

⁸ A.G. Dickens and Dorothy Carr, *The Reformation in England* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1967), 102-3.

Lincolnshire, the areas that caused most of the difficulty.⁹ To him, these individuals were treasonous and they required the issuance of force, with both words and actions. His answers to them are harsh and accusatory, and reveal much about his attitude and strategy in regard to the dissolution and dealing with those who might openly disagree with his actions as a sovereign.

At this point in time, after some of the rebelliousness had subsided, the general trend of dissolution of all monasteries was detected by some church leaders, and gradually, several of the greater monasteries chose to surrender to the crown even before the act that would dissolve them was passed. The *Act for Dissolution of the Greater Monasteries* was issued by parliament in 1539, and gave the Henrician government the power to overtake the remaining monastic lands in what was referred to as a non-coerced free submission to the king, the head of the Church of England. The act made it seem that the church leaders recognized the need for complete dissolution also, and willingly forfeited their monasteries. While it is highly unlikely that every church leader supported the dissolution and really desired to submit, the words of the act make it appear that final dissolution was accomplished through complete cooperation and a shared desire for destroying the monasteries on behalf of the church officials. Using such a method was clearly part of Henry VIII's strategy and his attitude, since making the second dissolution look like submission supplied him with justification for beginning monastic dissolution.

⁹ T. Bertheleti, Henry VIII, *Answer made by the Kynges Hyghnes to the petitions of the rebelles in Yorkeshire, 1536*. Microfilm: Pollard and Redgrave, reel 13077.

T. Bertheleti, Henry VIII, *Answer to the petitions of the traytours and rebelles in Lyncolnshyre, 1536*. Microfilm: Pollard and Redgrave, reel 13077.5.

Henry VIII's plan for Reformation was made clear through the *Act of Supremacy*: he was to be the head of the church and make all of the decisions. The dissolution of the monasteries was important in Henry VIII's plan for Reformation because the religious houses were symbolic remnants of papal authority that had to be crushed in order to drown out all foreign influence. Also, dissolving the monasteries was an act that clearly exercised the kind of authority Henry VIII bestowed upon himself through the *Act of Supremacy*. The type of control he desired was made manifest through the dissolution of the monasteries, and any attempt to defy him was crushed mercilessly. Clearly, the dissolution was key to Henry VIII's plan for Reformation, and much evidence exists about his motivations for doing so, as well as his attitude and strategy.

Several pieces of invaluable primary sources form the basis for this study, and support the assertion that the dissolution was key to the Henrician plan for reform. Through an intense examination of the *Acts of Dissolution of the Monasteries*, both of the Lesser and Greater, one can gain a better understanding of the tactics used by the Henrician government.¹⁰ It was necessary to paint the monasteries as sinful dwellings full of leisure and vice, completely void of virtue and spiritual leadership. The swift, hollow investigations that were conducted, which relied mostly on local gossip, were created to virtually damn the existence of the monasteries. Letters to Cromwell from Dr. Richard Layton, one of the investigators, reveal much about the nature of the undertaking, suggesting that Dr.

¹⁰ *Act for Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries, 1536* (27 Hen. VIII, c. 28)
Act for Dissolution of the Greater Monasteries, 1539 (31 Hen. VIII, c. 13)
A.G. Dickens and Dorothy Carr, *The Reformation in England*. (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1967).

Layton was equipped with an agenda provided by the Henrician government.¹¹ If the monasteries were not cherished institutions, what would have motivated the crown to form such a disingenuous investigation? Clearly, suggesting that most monasteries were dens of iniquity was thought to be necessary in order to justify dissolution, and while some of Henry VIII's subjects gleefully participated in their destruction, others were in clear opposition to the brand of reform that was being poured out by the king.

While some of Henry's subjects resigned themselves to the changes contracted by reform, others were not so reserved, thereby prompting more action on behalf of the crown. The northern towns of England, namely Lincolnshire and Yorkshire, seemed to be most disturbed by the news that their monasteries would be dissolved, and were motivated to action that was answered promptly by the king. In Henry's responses to the rebels at Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, it is clear that his goal was to reinforce his authority by threatening those who dare defy him and his move toward Reformation.¹² His response was completely necessary in order to maintain the course on which he had set his country, and also reveal much about his attitude. Strength and power are both conveyed through the words of both documents, and his strategy of total empowerment and the demand for public obedience is made perfectly clear.

¹¹ Richard Layton to Cromwell, 24 August 1535.

George Henry Cook, *Letters to Cromwell on the suppression of the monasteries* (London: J. Baker, 1965).

¹² T. Bertheleti, Henry VIII, *Answer made by the Kynges Hyghnes to the petitions of the rebelles in Yorkeshire, 1536* (Microfilm: Pollard and Redgrave, reel 13077).

T. Bertheleti, Henry VIII, *Answer to the petitions of the traytours and rebelles in Lyncolnshyre, 1536* (Microfilm: Pollard and Redgrave, reel 13077.5).

One point we need to keep in mind is how accurately these acts reflect Henry VIII's personal and political goals in his charge for Reformation. Although these were parliamentary acts, scholars agree that he enjoyed a certain "unprecedented authority," in which the relationship between Henry VIII and his parliament was one where the monarch exercised most of the influence and was not denied his most subversive changes he planned to make.¹³ His authority is also exuded and confirmed in the acts themselves, which also supports the claim that the broad extent of his authority was supported by parliament. This will become more evident with a critical examination of the documents themselves. The language reveals that the king was to be deferred to on all matters, both spiritual and temporal, and certainly parliament must have agreed with those changes. The kind of loyalty and support Henry VIII received from parliament was expected from everyone as Henry planned the Reformation in his attempt to secure his line to the throne of England.

There are many examples that reveal not only obedience to Henry VIII's new methods of reform, but also those who chose to, in fact, celebrate the changes and rejoice in the Reformation and the freedom from the Catholic Church. Three authors that conveyed such complete rapture about the dissolution of the monasteries and the relinquishing of Catholic authority include Thomas Starkey, T. Godfray, and T. Swinnerton. Each individual expressed complete support for their king and held an extremely anti-Catholic bias.

¹³ Erickson, 252.

Thomas Starkey published an infrequently cited work entitled, *An exhortation to the people, instructyng theym to vnitie and obedience*,¹⁴ published the same year as the lesser monasteries were dissolved. Starkey's words reveal a need to inspire the people to offer support to their king, which suggests Starkey's awareness that many subjects were displeased with the changes being made. The intention of the work was clearly to gather up support for the king, which was necessary for the Reformation to continue in England.

Two other important documents overlooked by top scholars include T. Godfray's, *A panegyric of Henry VIII as the abolisher of papist abuses*, 1536-1537,¹⁵ and an earlier work by T. Swinnerton entitled, *A litel treatise ageynste the mutterynge of some papists in corners*, 1534.¹⁶ Although these individuals are not widely known, their insights into the views of the day are priceless and are also excellent examples of those who supported the king's plan for Reformation. While Godfray spends a good deal of time praising his king, Swinnerton attempts to convince those who rejected change. Even though these are not official documents of the court of Henry VIII, we cannot discount the importance of contemporary literature, which reflects the concerns of their contemporary issues. It is clear both authors saw the need to justify the changes occurring, and both works provide a different example of support for their king.

¹⁴ Thomas Starkey, *An exhortation to the people instructyng theym to vnitie and obedience*, 1536 (Microfilm: Pollard and Redgrave, reel 23236).

¹⁵ T. Godfray, *A panegyric of Henry VIII as the abolisher of papist abuses*, 1536-1537 (Microfilm: Pollard and Redgrave, reel 13084A).

¹⁶ T. Swinnerton, *A litel treatise ageynste the mutterynge of some papists in corners*, 1534 (Microfilm: Pollard and Redgrave, reel 19177).

Taken together, these invaluable pieces of evidence from both private authors and the formal royal documents paint a complex picture of Reformation England under Henry VIII. Stamping out one of the most notable Catholic institutions, the monasteries, was a stern show of force on behalf of Henry VIII and his desire to assert his authority and eliminate any foreign influence, the most threatening of which would certainly be the pope. Scholars have spent a great deal of time discussing whether or not England was strong in the Catholic faith prior to Reformation, but for the Henrician government to launch a massive campaign against the monasteries, complete with investigations and audits, it is possible to draw the conclusion that the traditional faith must have been considerably strong among the people. Eamon Duffy and J.J. Scarisbrick are highly acclaimed revisionists, both of whom claim that England was full of faithful Catholics prior to the Reformation and that anti-clericalism was relatively rare. However, this study, while probing deeper into some popular documents and investigating documents that have not been cited by leading scholars, asserts that the dissolution of the monasteries was important to Henry VIII's plans for Reformation because it was an act that attempted to further separate his subjects from any foreign, Catholic influence, and place him deeper into a position of authority as the leader of the Church of England.

In order for the discussion to be the most concise, it is necessary to divide the subject into eight chapters. While the current chapter provides the introductory information, the second chapter will provide the historiographical section, which will briefly address the most common argument in English Reformation history:

Did the English Reformation occur from the lower classes up to the wealthier classes, or was the case reversed? It is possible to conclude that, without the initial force of the crown, the Reformation would have been slow in coming to England, at the very best. The present research suggests that the strong hand of Henry VIII, guided by his own political and personal ambitions, initiated the Reformation through a series of parliamentary acts, one of the most important of which were the acts that dissolved the monasteries. Certainly, the “from above” theory, which will be discussed further later, is supported by the present research, since there is a critical examination of Henry’s words and the acts of parliament that were enacted under his reign, which ignited the reform. When the monasteries were dissolved, Henry VIII made one of the most crucial alterations to England’s traditional Church. The leading scholars have some strong opinions about the monasteries and their importance, but such a powerful change reveals much about Henry VIII’s attitude and plans for Reformation.

This discussion leads to the third chapter, in which the initial consideration of the monasteries is undertaken. In order to conclude that the monasteries played an important role in Henry VIII’s plan for Reformation, it is necessary to understand the role the monasteries played in the first place. What did they meant to the people who called them home and to those who lived near them? If they were widely despised institutions, why did the crown go to so much trouble to drum up charges against them? Dr. Layton and his letters to Cromwell reveal the sort of campaign directed by the Henrician government against the monasteries. However, understanding the purpose of the monasteries and how, or if, they were revered by

the people may provide some insight into why the general population reacted to their destruction the way they did, and why dissolving them was key to the plan for Reformation.

The developments leading up to the dissolution are discussed in the fourth chapter, which include an act of parliament, and two detailed government investigations. *The Act of First Fruits and Tenths* was one of the first acts that negatively affected the church, and the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* provided a complete assessment of church holdings and income prior to the dissolution. In addition, the letters from Dr. Legh and Dr. Layton provide some insight into the type of investigation the Henrician government launched against the church, in which the morality and spiritual wellness of the church was questioned.

Chapter five explores the separate *Acts for Dissolution of the Monasteries*, and pays careful attention to the language used in the documents. From the assertions and claims made by Henry VIII in these documents, especially concerning extending the width and breadth of his authority, the move to dissolve the monasteries was one of the most crucial parts of the plan for Reformation. These documents also reveal much about his attitude and almost obsession with complete control over the development of the Reformation, as do his replies to the rebels in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, which are discussed in the following chapter.

In chapter six, there is a critical analysis of the King's stern response to those who chose to revolt against his decision to dissolve the monasteries. In his treatises against the northern towns of Lincolnshire and Yorkshire, it is easy to grasp his harsh nature and inability to compromise. Clearly, his plan for

Reformation also required that his subjects blindly defer to him on all matters of religion, and this is nowhere more clear than his insistence that his subjects accept the dissolution of the monasteries. These regions were rife with hostility, but were contained, which only reinforced the king's will. If Henry VIII had a demand for loyalty, then securing these regions that dared oppose him became completely necessary. One of Henry VIII's primary goals was consolidation of the crown's authority, so any notion of compromise might have been perceived as weakness, which would have been unacceptable.¹⁷

The seventh chapter discusses the three important documents by Thomas Starkey, T. Swinnerton, and T. Godfray. Although the effects of their publications on the masses cannot be gauged, their concerns and suggestions are examples of the type of support that Henry VIII desired. Their anti-Catholic rhetoric mirrors the kind the king expressed in his own writings against the rebels in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, and both acts for dissolution. They express a general displeasure with the Catholic Church and the monastic orders, like Henry VIII expressed, and also lend some support to the view that, despite the Pilgrimage of Grace and other examples of displeasure with the modes of reform, serious support for the king did exist.

Once the above documents have been thoroughly discussed, chapter eight, the final chapter, concludes that the dissolution of the monasteries was key to Henry VIII's plan for Reformation in England. Most notably, because the sheer action alone was a reflection of the power Henry VIII both desired and enjoyed over the Church of England and his subjects, and also because the dissolution dissolved a

¹⁷ Erickson, 253.

source of foreign, Catholic influence that the king wanted eliminated. Henry VIII was a powerful ruler, whose wishes were not denied by his parliament, and no boundary was too sacred to be defiled for the sake of ambition and complete power, not even the monasteries.

CHAPTER II

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE ENGLISH REFORMATION

The literature on the English Reformation is expansive, and there are several authors that deserve special acclamation for their concise arguments and suggestions that have shaped the historiography. For the purposes of this study, how these scholars approach the dissolution of the monasteries and the state of the Catholic faith in England at the time of Reformation is particularly important. Directly connected to this discussion are the two feuding schools of thought regarding the English Reformation: those who believe the Reformation was conducted from above and those who believe it was conducted from below. Those who believe it was conducted from below believe that the Reformation developed because of the influence of the common individual, and the idea that they began to reject Catholicism and leaned more toward Lollardy or another facet of Protestantism. Those who believe the Reformation was conducted from above reject the idea that there was any influence from the common individual, but rather the rejection of Catholicism and the concept of reform were initiated by the king and parliament alone. The present study asserts that the Reformation in England began through the actions of Henry VIII and the acts passed through parliament under his reign. Clearly, the dissolution of the monasteries is an example of the extreme measures taken by the Henrician government in an effort to reform. Nevertheless, those who adopted the “from below” theory fall more in line with

earlier, more traditional thought, while the “from above” theorists are generally referred to as revisionists.

A.G. Dickens and G.R. Elton are two scholars noted for their adoption of what is referred to as the “from below” theory of the spread of Protestantism in England. To these historians, Catholicism was already on its way out, because of developments in society, private religious devotion, and intellectual change. Dickens, most of whose work was published in the 1960’s, asserts in his material that England was leaning toward Protestantism long before Henry VIII declared himself head of the church, from which one can conclude that the ties with Rome were already severed in the hearts of the people before they were officially severed by the king. He suggests that underground Lollard communities helped advance the Protestant cause, but Dickens recognizes that the state also helped advance the process.¹⁸ However, his evidence of Lollard communities is sparse and limited, which hardly indicates any broad-sweeping movement on behalf of the people in leaning toward Protestantism. More relevant to this study is Dickens’ claim that there was an anticlerical sentiment directed toward the monasteries because of their excessive wealth due to mismanaged profits. Also important is his discussion of the dissolution of the monasteries, in which he asserts that the monasteries had dwindled in their importance, and fails to see their elimination as anything too significant.¹⁹ Dickens does not explore how important these religious edifices were, and instead uses the notion that they were obsolete to support his claim that Protestantism was on the rise. However, if Dickens is correct, and the monasteries

¹⁸ A.G. Dickens and Dorothy Carr, eds., *The Reformation in England* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1967), 1-5.

¹⁹ Dickens and Carr, eds., 6-8.

were in fact obsolete, why were Dr. Layton and Mr. Legh contracted to investigate the moral state of the monasteries and advised to report findings that would shame the monasteries? If there was already a trend against the monastic institutions, why would it have been necessary to instruct them to find sin? Dickens fails to discuss this, though he included an excerpt of one of Dr. Layton's letters to Cromwell.²⁰ Dickens uses the letter as an example of the kind of accusations being made against the Church, such as the clergy breaking their vows and committing sins with the local laypersons, which did occur in some cases that we will examine later.

A notable colleague of Dickens, G.R. Elton, shares several of his views. Elton, a scholar published mainly in the 1970's, agrees that anticlericalism was a problem in the sixteenth century, although his research suggests that perhaps the clergy were not as immoral as many previous scholars have assumed. Elton, like Dickens, discusses the presence of the Lollards as a factor in spreading Protestantism, but not to the same degree. Instead, Elton probes deeper by suggesting a more intellectual reason for the spread of Protestantism. To him, humanism and the educated elites might have helped widen the gap between England and Rome more than any centuries-old failed religious sect.²¹ However, Dickens examined Lollard letters and secret treatises to arrive at his point, while Elton focuses more on the lack of royal policy against the Lollards in the early sixteenth-century that would suggest that they were any sort of threat. While both scholars admit that the Reformation was certainly advanced through royal policies, they would reject the notion that the population in general was against any religious

²⁰ Dickens and Carr, eds., 94.

²¹ G.R. Elton, *Reform and Reformation*. (Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1977), 6-12.

change.²² Both scholars would also reject the findings of this study, that the dissolution of the monasteries was key to Henry VIII's plan for Reformation, because both scholars generally reject the importance of the monasteries and deny that any real Catholic influence flooded the hearts of the population. Again, both scholars ignore the series of events leading up to the dissolution of the monasteries and fail to credit any significance to the Pilgrimage of Grace and to those who spoke against the dissolutions. Their emphasis on the "from below" theory makes it easy for them to place little importance on Henry VIII's ambition and desire for power and control, which is clearly evident in his reply to those who defy him and the wording of the *Acts for Dissolution*.

The "from above" theory has been championed foremost by J.J. Scarisbrick and Christopher Haigh. The revisionist work of Scarisbrick and Haigh in the 1980's suggested that the Reformation in England was conducted by the political forces in the Henrician government. By sifting through church records, wills, and community records, Scarisbrick determined that faith in the Catholic Church was never stronger than prior to the Reformation in England, and asserts that the dissolution of the monasteries affected local people more severely than the actual break with Rome itself.²³ Scarisbrick flatly rejects the notion that anticlericalism was a pervasive problem in sixteenth-century English society, and instead he provides examples of individuals venerating saints, writing wills with traditional Catholic themes, and hosts of pilgrimages. Scarisbrick also provides one

²² Elton, 11.

Dickens and Carr, 3.

²³ J.J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publishers, 1984), 68.

of the most complete accounts of the nature, character, and ambition of Henry VIII in his work, *Henry VIII*.²⁴ Scarisbrick notes the ambitious nature of the king, and his harsh quality, which all scholars tend to agree was generally so. Even G.R. Elton, whose approach is quite different from Scarisbrick, admitted that Scarisbrick's biography of the monarch was definitive.²⁵ Nevertheless, Scarisbrick is not alone in his adoption of the revisionist view of the English Reformation, since other authors share this view, not the least of which is Christopher Haigh.

Haigh points out that it requires no effort simply to conclude that the Reformation succeeded because the people were at odds with the church, but that to assume this is so is incorrect. Instead, Haigh believes that there was no widespread enthusiasm among the English population for any of the acts that debilitated the Catholic Church, especially the dissolution of the monasteries.²⁶ To both Haigh and Scarisbrick, compliance did not necessarily mean agreement, and those historians who point to the individuals who did help destroy the monasteries, or the few examples of anticlericalism, are missing a crucial point. The more important fact is that the common people could not dictate or alter the decisions of the crown, and silence on their part did not mean agreement.

It is necessary to note, however, that both Scarisbrick and Haigh tended to examine similar sources. For example, Haigh spent a good deal of time focusing on the records of the northern monasteries, such as Lincolnshire and Yorkshire.²⁷

²⁴ J.J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

²⁵ Elton, 406.

²⁶ Christopher Haigh, ed., *The English Reformation Revised* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 56.

²⁷ Christopher Haigh, *Reformation and Resistance in Tudor Lancashire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

Christopher Haigh, *The Last Days of the Lancashire Monasteries and the Pilgrimage of Grace*

Scarisbrick also did a good deal of his research on the northern cities, since there is where the most activity against monastic dissolution thrived. Because of their acknowledgement of the importance of the dissolution of the monasteries, and their focus on the northern cities and their participation in the Pilgrimage of Grace, Scarisbrick's and Haigh's views are supported by the present work. Also, the "from above" mentality is reflected by this body of research, since the aim is to reveal just how important the dissolution of the monasteries was in Henry VIII's plan for reformation, as well as the consideration of his personal ambition, and motivations. While this study generally is in accordance with the findings of Scarisbrick and Haigh, the present study builds on their conclusions and reveals that the dissolution of the monasteries was a key part of Henry's plan for Reformation, which was influenced by his desire for control and the elimination of foreign influence that was generally found in the monasteries.

In the later part of the 1990's, following into the twenty-first century, the latest scholars see the from above or from below theories as too clean a depiction of what truly occurred. For example, Robert Whiting and Ethan Shagan provide evidence of many regions of England that aided gleefully in the destruction of the monasteries, thereby suggesting decay in the relations between the common people and the Catholic faith. Shagan often hones in on Gloucestershire, Worcestershire, and Lincolnshire records, but the majority of his evidence is royal documentation, such as the records of the Court of Augmentations and the local church records. One example he provides in particular is the fate of the Abbey of Hailes, which will be discussed in further detail later, and its destruction as an excellent example of

(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969).

negative behavior against the church. The angered, greedy locals participated in dismantling the monastery and absconded with anything of value. Such evidence seems to support the views of Dickens and Elton; the fact that the people were willing to destroy these holy domains demonstrates that anticlericalism existed, at least in some areas of England. Shagan notes that, according to royal records, violent attacks on behalf of the local people left many abbeys unrecognizable.²⁸ Whiting adds to this by asserting that even before the dissolution of the monasteries, there were accounts of people raiding and vandalizing monastic property as early as 1530.²⁹

Whiting is looking at evidence that is similar to Shagan's, and therefore arrives at a similar conclusion. Whiting finds it odd that hardly any organized community effort surfaced to champion the survival of the monasteries, which again supports the idea that the English people in general were not agonizing over the country's break with Roman Catholicism. Yet in order to arrive at such a conclusion, the Pilgrimage of Grace and any other form of local displeasure with the dissolution of the monasteries would have to be marginalized, which is not really valid. However, neither Whiting nor Shagan make the claim that England's Reformation was inspired from below. Instead, they argue that the Reformation in England should be viewed as more of a collaborative effort between the people and their sovereign. Labels like "from above" or "from below" do not explain the entire situation sufficiently, according to Whiting and Shagan. While they both recognize

²⁸ Ethan H. Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 160-165.

²⁹ Robert Whiting, *Local Responses to the English Reformation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 17-19.

that there were serious cases of anticlericalism, they also understand that without legal direction handed down from the crown and parliament, the Reformation would have had considerable difficulty succeeding.

By researching liturgical books, devotional treatises, wills, and ecclesiastical court records, historian Eamon Duffy concluded that most of England clung close to Catholicism before the Reformation claimed the country through the acts of government. Duffy argued that common laypersons were actually, for the most part, sincere and passionate Catholics, whose faith was steadfast.³⁰ On the eve of the Reformation in England, Duffy notes that there were over 50,000 Catholic liturgical books in circulation, which focused on prayer.³¹ This fact suggests a certain degree of spirituality among the people, but it is important to note that any element of truth about the common people is always difficult to make certain. Duffy concludes that, if Catholicism had not been so potent a force in the lives of the people, the Henrician government would not have needed to go to the lengths it did to destroy it, such as dissolving the monasteries.

Historian Norman Jones adds to this idea by claiming that the Henrician government had to pay careful attention to the way in which it handled the dissolution of the monasteries so as to not inspire fear in secular property owners.³² Too much force on behalf of the government might suggest to men who held property that government confiscation was possible at any time. Many of the

³⁰ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, (New Haven and London: New Haven Publishers, 1992).

Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village* (New Haven: New Haven Publishers, 2001).

³¹ Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 3.

³² Norman Jones, *The English Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 70.

abbeys were quite wealthy, and public perception was enough of a government concern to recognize the importance of monasteries, and to construct in a verbally tactful way to explain their dissolution. Both Duffy and Jones find the crown to be most responsible for the Reformation in England, and might accept the assertion of this study, which suggests that the dissolving the monasteries was integral to the king's plan for Reformation. Duffy and Jones do not spend a great deal of time on Henry VIII as an individual with ambitions and motivations, and instead focus their research on what local evidence exists in reference to the genuine, faithful Catholics that existed on the eve of the Reformation.

Some historians might be described as ultra-revisionists in the findings of their research. For example, Hans J. Hillerbrand rejects any possibility that any spiritual reform took place in England. Although he is a scholar of all Reformation History, and not strictly confined to the Reformation in England, his insight that England was “seen to offer little theological substance and much marital adventure” places the entire Reformation in England as a result of the personal whims of Henry VIII.³³ While there is clear evidence that Henry VIII's personal life inspired some of the changes he made, Hillerbrand's statement is a little too sweeping. We cannot discount Henry's powerful ambitions, and his intent to solidify his country politically by eliminating any impediment, including the Catholic Church and its institutions. While Hillerbrand is a contemporary historian, he is discounting the political nature of the Reformation in England by making it a purely selfish, one-

³³ Hans J. Hillerbrand, “Was there a Reformation in the sixteenth-century?” *Church History* 72:3 (September 2003), 527.

sided act. Such an assertion would also lump Hillerbrand in the “from above” school of thought in the most strict sense.

As presented above, not all historians of the English Reformation have sought to contribute to the debate between the from above and from below theories. Some have simply studied certain aspects of the Reformation in England, including the Dissolution of the Monasteries, which is a pinnacle event to most historians and the special focus of this particular study. Authors Geoffrey Baskerville, G.W.O. Woodward, Joyce Youings, and David Knowles have dedicated entire works to the study of the cause, effect, and other facets of the Dissolution of the Monasteries in England, thereby recognizing its importance in the process of Reformation in England.

While Geoffrey Baskerville’s work was early in the twentieth century and might be considered outdated, he is still a notable scholar and provides much information about the monks in England at the time of the dissolution. His sources include documented monastic visitations prior to the dissolution, as well as the documented accounts of actual dissolutions. However, for the purposes of this study, his discussion on the function of the monasteries is particularly important. Baskerville asserts that “Prayers, hospitality, [and] alms were the duties which the medieval monasteries were bound by law to perform.”³⁴ In order to arrive at the conclusion that the dissolution of the monasteries was key to Henry VIII’s plan for Reformation, we have to understand the role the monasteries played in the first place, and Baskerville’s discussion will be revisited later.

³⁴ Geoffrey Baskerville, *English Monks and the Suppression of the Monasteries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), 19.

Another historian whose area of study rested solely on the dissolution of the monasteries was G.W.O. Woodward. By pouring over pieces of sixteenth-century legislation and reports on the status and function of monasteries, G.W.O. Woodward concludes that the dissolution of the monasteries, if nothing else, simply made good economic sense. Woodward, who like Dickens wrote most of his work in the 1960's, acknowledges but pays little heed to the religious concerns of the early sixteenth-century, and instead reasons that Henry and his advisors saw the wealth and wisdom in confiscating church property, which would enrich England's economy substantially.³⁵ Woodward holds that the crown viewed the monasteries as an untapped economic source, and not as a spiritual threat to Henry's personal power as king the way Duffy and others suggest. The dissolution of the monasteries, to Woodward, was in accordance with the secular trend already developing in English society.³⁶ However, Woodward's views are not reflected by an overwhelming number of historians, and the assertion that Henry and his cohorts somehow had a fantastic insight into capitalism seems unlikely. Yet his creative addition to the historiography is worth noting.

Both David Knowles and Joyce Youings have centered their lives' work on English Monasticism and its destruction. While Knowles published material as early as the 1940's, like Youings, some of his most notable work was done in the 1970's, which was also close to the work G.R. Elton. They each approach the study of the dissolution of the monasteries quite differently from Woodward. Knowles asserts that the dissolution was more of a spiritual effort, meaning that the

³⁵ G.W.O. Woodward, *Dissolution of the Monasteries* (London; Blanford Press, 1966), 173.

³⁶ Woodward, 160-165.

Henrician government had to dissolve the monasteries to further separate the people from Catholic remnants.³⁷ This falls in line with Duffy's claim that Henry saw the threat present in the people's adoration for the Catholic faith and its institutions.

However, Knowles is not asserting that Henry VIII was a Protestant; to the contrary, Henry was not, and he made no such doctrinal changes to the Church of England reflecting justification by faith, predestination, or any other of the inherently Protestant theological renovations. Yet, supporters of King Henry VIII were quick to espouse anti-Catholic rhetoric, as we will see in the work of T.

Godfray, T. Swinnerton, and Thomas Starkey - a fact that David Knowles ignores and the present study examines carefully. Henry's concern, according to Knowles, was the public's devotion to things Catholic that needed to be transferred to him as head of the Church of England. Knowles is also quick to recognize the influence and importance of the monastic institutions, and how their dissolution affected the society they were created to serve.³⁸ However, to his discredit, Knowles rarely cites his sources in footnotes and his bibliography is limited, so the reader is left to assume the documents he employed to arrive at his conclusions.

Joyce Youings, while a contemporary of Knowles and one of the few authors mentioned in his bibliography, does not leave her sources and documents as a mystery to the reader. In fact, she lists some of them in complete form, such as an account of the circumstances at Gloucestershire concerning the black friars, and an exhortation by Thomas Starkey about the way monastic lands would be divided.

³⁷ David Knowles, *Bare Ruined Choirs: The Dissolution of the English Monasteries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 1-7.

³⁸ David Knowles, "The Cultural Influence of English Monasticism" *Cambridge Historical Journal* 7:3 (November 1943), 146-159.

From documents like these, Youings makes the claim that Henry VIII viewed dissolving the monasteries as a restoration of land that had once belonged to the crown, which might inspire loyalty.³⁹ If the monasteries were no longer there, the loyalty that was once felt for the pope and other remnants of the Catholic faith would logically be transferred to king and country. According to Youings, the years of donations of private land to the church had to be returned to the crown, which would then sell them for profit. In addition, the Henrician government had concerns about the loyalty of the foreign members of the monastic orders, who would have likely had ties to their homeland, as well as to Rome. The loyalty the Franciscan Observants had to the pope is an excellent example of the brand of allegiance expressed by many orders within the monasteries. Paul Ayris, a noted theological historian, adds to this argument, by pointing out that monks were executed in their habits for refusing to take an oath of allegiance to Henry VIII.⁴⁰ While Ayris's work came much later in the scheme of notable historiography, the points he emphasizes build on Youing's claim. The monasteries were centers of devotion to the pope, as Ayris argues, and therefore had to be dismantled. If allegiance to the pope was a genuine concern of the crown, which had to be eradicated, Ayris's point falls completely in line with the assertion that the Reformation in England succeeded only as a result of a series of official procedures, with the destruction of the monasteries at the top of the list.

Each of these authors provides a special insight into the development of the reformation in England. Some may adhere to the "from below" school of

³⁹ Joyce Youings, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1971), 32.

⁴⁰ Paul Ayris, "Destroying the Monasteries" *Journal of Christian History* 14:4 (1995).

thought, such as Dickens or Elton who cite examples such as secret Lollard communities. Others carry the “from above” theory, including Scarisbrick and Haigh who do not share the view that anticlericalism was widespread. The most recent innovations in the historiography are provided by Shagan and Whiting, both of whom see the Reformation transpiring as a result of a combination of the authorities from above and the actions of the common people. Historians like Youngs, Knowles, and Woodward have found that one aspect of the Reformation in England, like the dissolution of the monasteries, can inspire a host of discussion and different ideas just about one facet of Reformation development. However, each of these historians addresses the dissolution of the monasteries and uses specific accounts to support their particular views on Reformation England. Because these authors address the monasteries, they are particularly crucial to this study, and they reveal the complex society of the early sixteenth century and its Catholic population in a country caught up in the early stages of the Reformation in England. The dissolution of the monasteries, as Scarisbrick notes, was one of the most significant changes in sixteenth-century England, but he does not view it as part of Henry VIII’s plan for Reformation. Scholars like Duffy, Scarisbrick, and Haigh, who have certainly looked at the acts for dissolution and the king’s answers to the rebels at Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, though they may not have cited them, spend most of their time lamenting the lost institutions and fail to see their destruction as more than a whim on behalf of the king. However, the present study concludes that the dissolution of the monasteries was a key portion of the plan for Reformation in England under the rule of Henry VIII, because they were centers for

Catholic leadership and offered connections to foreign entities that had to be eliminated, and were also untapped resources for the crown to use. Also, none of the above scholars have cited the published works of T. Godfray, T. Swinnerton, and Thomas Starkey, which have been examined critically in the present study. Therefore, the above scholars have also not made the following connection to these works and Henry VIII: These individuals, who were zealous supporters of Henry VIII and his policies, maintained an anti-Catholic point of view, even though Henry VIII did have an aversion to most Protestant theology. Their expression of support with extremely anti-Catholic phrases might suggest that, in order for support for the king's reform to spread in England, demonizing the Catholic Church was helpful. Though Henry VIII may have disliked most aspects of Protestantism, under his reign, he destroyed one of the most valued Catholic institutions of all time, the monasteries, and some of his strongest supporters were quick to publish anti-Catholic literature. However, before we can discuss how crucial the dissolution of the monasteries was to Henry VIII's plan for Reformation, and his motivations and attitude, we must first examine the role the monasteries played in early sixteenth-century England.

CHAPTER III

THE ROLE OF THE MONASTERIES IN EARLY SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

It is easy to romanticize the loss of the monasteries for the basic historical value of the structures themselves, especially those that boasted more ornate architecture, but they served other purposes besides exuding structural magnificence and representing traditional Christianity. Scholars have debated the role and function of the monasteries at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and it is important to acknowledge some of the key points suggested in regard to this matter. Understanding the role and function of the monasteries leads to a discussion on why it was so important to Henry VIII's plan for Reformation that they be dissolved. Were they the wells of spirituality that the common people drank from, or were they shelters for unseemly behavior on the part of the clergy? The crown's investigation into the state of the monasteries will be discussed in the following chapter, including a close examination of the findings of the Dr. Layton and Mr. Legh, both of whom were the principal investigators.⁴¹ Since the Henrician government launched a campaign to portray them negatively, through the investigation of Dr. Layton and others, it is arguable that such a campaign would not have been necessary had the monasteries been unpopular.⁴² Yet there was an

⁴¹ George Henry Cook, *Letters to Cromwell on the Suppression of the Monasteries* (London: J. Baker, 1965).

⁴² Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 2-15.

investigation, full of negative findings, which Henry VIII would later cite in his *Act for Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries*.

Some historians have not questioned the importance of the monasteries in sixteenth-century society, and J.J. Scarisbrick certainly subscribes to this point of view. He addresses the place of the monasteries of early sixteenth-century England in this passionate passage:

[The monasteries] affected daily life more deeply and widely than did the breach with Rome and was more difficult to repair. England had been a land of fair abbeys, had poured much wealth and many skills into building them; and it owed much to them. If they could be struck down, there was nothing safe or sacrosanct. England without monks, friars and nuns was an England that had indeed turned its back on the past.⁴³

Scarisbrick laments their passing as a serious alteration in English history, and one of the most important events in the entire English Reformation. His analysis suggests to the reader that the monasteries were important to the common person's daily life, even if only symbolically. Here, Scarisbrick is not only regretting the passing of an England with monasteries; he is regretting the passing of a Catholic England. Clearly, the monasteries stood as a representation of the Catholic England the crown had eliminated with the passing of the *Act of Supremacy*.⁴⁴ It should not have taken the dissolution of the monasteries to make Scarisbrick and other scholars realize that "nothing was sacred," since Henry VIII was ambitious enough to remove the authority of the pope and the influence of the traditional religion of his country, which he replaced with himself as the spiritual head of England.

⁴³ Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People*, 68.

⁴⁴ Janz, ed., *The Act of Supremacy 1534*, 285-6.

But what were these monasteries to the people? A monastery could function as a school, a place of employment for a common laborer, a place for the homeless or travelers to rest and find comfort, and of course, they supplied a place for prayer.⁴⁵ Prayers were especially important, and the inhabitants of the monasteries provided intercessory prayer on behalf of the dead as well as the living. Baskerville asserts that “prayers, first for founders and benefactors, then for all Christian souls: these were the most important duties of the religious, for were they not the condition on which they held their lands?”⁴⁶ It was not an uncommon practice for masses to be said for the dead, or prayers to be offered up for them through these institutions. Dr. R.W. Hoyle of the University of Central Lancashire states that “the normal late medieval practice was for masses and prayers for the souls of the departed to be said not in perpetuity but over a fixed period,” but adds that, mainly, “they served to offer prayers and masses for their founders and benefactors and their families.”⁴⁷ Certainly, the abbots or abbesses would advocate the prayer of their benefactors, which is completely logical, but it is difficult for anyone to know for certain the subject of monastic prayers, or to make the assertion that most prayers were strictly for those who helped begin or sustain the religious houses. Nevertheless, prayer was one of the functions that the monasteries performed, and as Dr. Baskerville noted above, allowed them to exist for the time that they did.

⁴⁵ Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People*, 74.

⁴⁶ Baskerville, 20.

⁴⁷ R.W. Hoyle, “The Origins of the Dissolution of the Monasteries” *The Historical Journal* 38:2 (1995) 276-7.

Another noted function of the monasteries was their care and attention to travelers or pilgrims, referred to as hospitality. While some monasteries were more equipped than others to aid those in need, it was generally understood among the population that one could receive rest or nourishment at a religious house while traveling or making a pilgrimage to a holy shrine. Wealthier patrons also found rest at monasteries rather than at inns, and there are expense records revealing that the monastery often provided entertainment, in the form of comedians or theatrical companies, for the more privileged guests.⁴⁸ However, most monasteries were not wealthy enough to provide such a service for their guests, and instead offered more modest accoutrements. It is important to keep in mind that, in the early sixteenth-century, there was no organized government-initiated social service.⁴⁹ The Church provided any assistance to the poor or those in need, and it was ultimately their responsibility to help them. Almsgiving, another responsibility of the religious houses, might consist of giving small amounts of coin or even food, which seems to have been most freely given on saint's days and holidays.⁵⁰ Those monasteries that could provide such a service were probably frequented and recognized for their offerings, but several of the monasteries were small and poor, and most likely unable to give on a regular basis. Some were not even documented or known, a fact that necessitated an audit, which will be discussed in the following chapter, yet they might have served a purpose to those who resided nearby. Not to mention that their very presence must have provided some comfort to the local people who gazed

⁴⁸ Baskerville, 26-8.

⁴⁹ Knowles, *Bare Ruined Choirs*, 80-5.

⁵⁰ Baskerville, 31-2.

upon the familiar buildings of their monastery either daily, or often enough to warrant at least limited affection.

The monasteries could also serve as places of employment for laypersons. Monasteries were usually involved in some element of agriculture, and people were required to provide the labor of the land. In fact, some of the cause of the rebellions in Lincolnshire that will be discussed further later was due to the fact that, without the monasteries, the people would be unemployed and therefore have no means of survival.⁵¹ Some communities depended largely on the monasteries for the income and opportunity the institution provided.

Having established that monastic functions included prayers, almsgiving, shelter to those traveling or on a pilgrimage, employment, and the offering of spiritual guidance, there is some evidence that calls into question how willing or equipped the monasteries were to perform these functions. For example, some of the southern monasteries had decided to limit the days of the week in which travelers or homeless people could find rest and nourishment.⁵² This was apparently to keep away those especially needy individuals who may have been very sick or difficult to help, but turning people away in any circumstance does not seem Christianly. Woodward and others claim that there were “no sweeping statements of monastic charity” and suggest that a secular institution could have done any function performed by the monastery.⁵³ But, if Woodward is correct, then why did the Henrician government feel that they needed to launch a campaign

⁵¹ Cook, 7.

⁵² Woodward, 19.

⁵³ Woodward, 19.

against the monasteries? If they were already widely recognized as useless, why was it necessary to paint a negative image of them?

Even their function as houses of prayer has been disputed. Youings boldly asserts, “Historians of widely different religious persuasions are today in remarkable agreement that the monasteries of early Tudor England and Wales were no longer playing an indispensable role in the spiritual life of the country,” though she fails to explain the basis for such an argument.⁵⁴ Perhaps the people had learned to pray for themselves, for Youings is not alone in her conclusion. Elton too concludes that, by the sixteenth century, “the monastic ideal and practice had ceased to have any hold on people’s minds and hearts,” and that they were no longer “active hearths of the old religion.”⁵⁵ He bases this assertion on the evidence that the dissolution of the monasteries succeeded with minimal objection on behalf of the people. To Elton, the lack of concern, save the isolated examples of Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, means that the people were not truly attached to the monasteries, so their destruction must have been of no concern to them. In some cases, this may well be true, but making such a sweeping statement about all of England’s monasteries may not be an accurate reflection of the entire country. It is not safe to assume that, since uprisings in response to the dissolutions were not conducted everywhere and en masse, the monastic institutions had outworn their usefulness and become obsolete. Several cases exist where the people tried to save their monastery through purchasing it, or through some other less aggressive manner. These scholars seem to ignore the fact that Henry VIII and his top

⁵⁴ Youings, 14.

⁵⁵ Elton, 240-241.

officials acted in concert to gather gossip concerning the monastic orders and portray them as sinful and unable to perform their duties. If they were no longer a cherished part of the traditional faith, perhaps Dr. Layton and Thomas Legh would not have been sent to gather negative information about the monasteries.

The incident regarding the Abbey of Tewkesbury is an excellent example of a community concerned and eager to preserve their local monastery. The Abbey of Tewkesbury was located in Gloucestershire, and was fortunate enough to survive the first act of dissolution. However, the Abbot, John Wakeman, had the notion that the abbey would not survive much longer, and in a motion to cooperate with the king, resolved to surrender his monastery, as many abbots decided to do. Upon hearing the decision of the abbot, the people of the town decided to purchase the abbey themselves. "The bailiffs, burgesses and commonality of the borough and town of Tewkesbury raised 483 pounds and purchased the said abbey church with the bells etc. and the churchyard etc. from the king to be used for ever there after."⁵⁶ Their strong attachment to the local monastery was made evident by their extraordinary decision to purchase it, and according to the Giles Geaste's charity accounts of the sixteenth-century, the people of Gloucestershire were by no means wealthy.⁵⁷ The fact that these people went to such great lengths to preserve their monastery suggests that Tewkesbury had not failed to function properly. Whether the move to save the abbey was inspired by spiritual matters or the possible attachment to the structure itself cannot be made certain, but the building was important enough for them to rescue from demolition.

⁵⁶ Caroline Litzenberger, *The English Reformation and the Laity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 49.

⁵⁷ Litzenberger, 50-1.

A conclusive statement regarding the people and their attitude toward local monasteries cannot ever be made, for the regular population was not in the habit of maintaining records. However, we do know that while some were loved, some were also guilty of wrongdoing. For example, in Manchester, two of the clergyman who vowed celibacy had wives and children, which neither of them attempted to hide.⁵⁸ Local knowledge of such behavior could not have been good for church morale, and suggests that some monasteries were not performing their function as moral guides and spiritual leaders.

Other, perhaps more spiritually sinister cases also exist, such as the incident concerning Thomas Kirby of Halsall. Haigh explains that Kirby “was accused of abusing his position to persuade the dying to remember him in their wills,” and that “he had been telling his parishioners that their relations were burning in purgatory, to obtain money for praying for them.”⁵⁹ The spiritual damage done by this individual could never be gauged, but must have been enormous.

Other more simple breaches of service, such as pluralism or absenteeism among the clergy, also serve as examples of negligence within the monastic orders. For example, William Seller of the monastery in Pendle was accused of being absent from his station quite often.⁶⁰ Upon discovery that the accusation was in fact correct, he was removed from his duties at the people’s behest. Although Seller’s breach may not be as grave as breaking a vow of celibacy, theft of goods or money,

⁵⁸ Christopher Haigh, *The Last Days of the Lancashire Monasteries and the Pilgrimage of Grace* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969), 1.

⁵⁹ Haigh, *The Last Days of the Lancashire Monasteries and the Pilgrimage of Grace*, 1.

⁶⁰ Haigh, *The Last Days of the Lancashire Monasteries and the Pilgrimage of Grace*, 2.

or tricking people out of money because they are concerned for the souls of their loved ones, it is still an example, however isolated, of a member of a monastic order in breach of his occupation.

Scholars will always debate the role the monasteries played in the daily lives of the people of England, since conflicting evidence exists, especially in reference to regional variations. While the northern and some western portions of England seemed to be host to those who favored their monastic institutions, the rest of the country was less likely to take up arms for their local religious house.

Scholars admit that there is no real way of discerning why this was, except that perhaps Catholicism may have been stronger in those regions. This connection to Catholicism via the monastic institutions may also have been part of the reason that the crown felt threatened by their existence. The letters to Cromwell from the team of investigators will be examined in the next chapter, as well as the origin of the investigation, but before that discussion can take place, there needs to be an understanding of why the monasteries were a threat in the first place.

The information above provides part of the answer to this question. Clearly, cases existed where the abbots, monks, or nuns were guilty of engaging in sinful activities, which might have been enough reason to launch an investigation. But would these activities be enough reason to dissolve them? If they had problems, which some of them did, surely some other action short of dissolution would have been enough to repair them. The real trouble lay in the question of their loyalty. One scholar suggests that “a danger regarding the unity of the realm was secretly feared, openly expressed, and carefully guarded against,” and Henry VIII

was concerned that the church might use some of its considerable wealth to aid enemies of England because of the recent break with Rome.⁶¹ It is true that Henry VIII was not a popular man on the international scene for going against Rome and declaring himself head of the Church of England. And it is clear that some of his subjects were also not pleased.

For example, in 1534, the Franciscan Observants made clear their displeasure when they refused to recognize the Act of Supremacy by swearing an oath to their king.⁶² The Carthusians and the Bridgettines shared the distress of the Observants, and disagreed completely with the changes being made in 1534 and after. This kind of disobedience and disruption was certainly alarming to the Henrician government, since Dr. Knowles notes that “it was precisely they who, in different ways and tempers, opposed the designs of the king and were in consequence silenced or dispersed by authority before the general assault was delivered upon all the religious orders.”⁶³ The Observants and others chose to remain true to their traditional faith, with the pope as the head of the Church, as the mendicants did before them. Several of the Observants and others were martyred as a result of their refusal to conform to Henry VIII’s new Church of England, which is terribly ironic since Henry VIII was baptized in a church belonging to the Observants.⁶⁴ While there is no evidence that other orders were inspired by their example, the executions and expulsions of those involved in the Observant revolt and the Pilgrimage of Grace certainly did not encourage others to follow in their

⁶¹ Oscar A. Marti, “Economic Factors Tending Toward Secularization of Church Property in England, 1533-1539” *The Journal of Political Economy* 37:4 (August 1929) 451.

⁶² Knowles, *Bare Ruined Choirs: The Dissolution of the English Monasteries*, 95.

⁶³ Knowles, *Bare Ruined Choirs: The Dissolution of the English Monasteries*, 91.

⁶⁴ Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, 3.

footsteps. Quiet submission was safer than reaction, since death or stern reprisal was the only reward for such behavior.

It was clear, however, to Henry VIII and Cromwell that some of the members of the monastic orders had the potential to act treasonously. Clearly, the actions of this handful of individuals had the ability to inspire other orders to also disobey, and may have influenced Cromwell and Henry VIII to initiate the plan for complete dissolution. If Henry VIII's strategy was complete empowerment and control over the Church of England, he needed to eradicate any force that might bond his subjects to another entity, namely the pope or any other foreign power. Protection and unity of his realm were his motivations, and rooting out any insolence was necessary to secure his line. The monasteries were the homes of some of his most earnest critics, and so their dissolution was a key part of his plan for Reformation.

CHAPTER IV

THE PLAN FOR DISSOLUTION

Before the monasteries were dissolved in 1536, there were a series of events that took place that began the Henrician government's attack on English Monasticism. Most scholars admit that there is no documented plan that researchers can draw from that would suggest a structured plan for dissolution, there are certain clues that we can draw from suggesting that the thought was imminent after the *Act of Supremacy*. The first two documents examined in this chapter reveal the beginnings of the inquiry into church holdings and the initial gathering of church wealth on behalf of the crown. The act annexing first fruits and tenths in 1534 was the first move to gather wealth from the church, and the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535 was a survey of monastic holdings. The third body of documents are known as *comperta*, which are the letters to Cromwell from the group of investigators sent to study the state of English Monasticism. The origins and findings of this investigation are particularly relevant to the present study, since they reveal the need for the crown to portray the monasteries negatively.

The *Act of Supremacy* issued by Henry VIII gave several hints about the changes that would follow the break with Rome, and tells much about his goals as king. One passage of the Act implies some of the plans in store after 1534. He proclaims that he became head of the church to "increase the virtue in Christ's religion within this realm of England, and to repress and extirp all errors, heresies,

and other enormities and abuses heretofore used in the same.”⁶⁵ If Henry’s goal was to purge the existing church of sin, significant change was certainly on the horizon. Not that any of the common people fully comprehended the plans of the Henrician Government, but such strong language suggests a plan for real change. Yet it is important to understand that Henry VIII was not advocating a transformation into genuine Protestantism. He did not try to advocate the type of theological changes that were occurring on the continent, such as the adoption of justification by faith or the rejection of transubstantiation, although liturgy was altered and he issued several seemingly anti-Catholic changes, such as monastic dissolution. In fact, one might even conclude that his break with Rome was his most anti-Catholic move of all, since it dishonored Pope Clement VII by leading to the revocation of his authority over souls in England.

However, when Henry VIII made the split with Rome, little changed for the general population in 1534. Instead, it was a removal of any papal authority over England, and as Shagan explains, “in a remarkable coup d’etat the head of the Church government was overthrown, his legal authority eliminated, his political power outlawed, and his subordinates brought under the jurisdiction of the king of England.”⁶⁶ The clergy were forced to swear allegiance to the king as head of the Church of England, but the masses were encouraged to look on their king as a more pronounced spiritual leader as well, as the pope no longer had authority in England. The *Act of Supremacy* further announces that, “Our said sovereign lord, his heirs and successors, Kings of this realm, shall have full power and authority from time

⁶⁵ “Act of Supremacy, 1534” Denis R. Janz, ed., *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 285.

⁶⁶Shagan, 29.

to time to visit, repress, redress, reform, order, correct, restrain and amend all such errors.”⁶⁷ The very words “reform,” “redress,” and “repress” empower the king to alter any facet of religion that might be deemed necessary. If one of Henry VIII’s goals was complete power over every facet of his country, including religion, he certainly achieved authority in religious matters. And again, it would be he who made the decision about what might need attention, and certainly suggested to all that read the document that drastic changes were possible, and probably imminent.

After Henry had declared himself head of the Church of England, one of the next steps he undertook was to devise a way to siphon money from the religious houses. The *Act of First Fruits and Tenths* declared that all new members of the clergy, propertied and salaried, were required to give the crown one full year’s income, and a tenth of their yearly income from then on.⁶⁸ This was applied to the secular clergy, who were usually quite wealthy, landed members of the aristocracy, including bishops and abbots. Nevertheless, it was an extreme financial blow to the clergy, and many suffered as a result of this act.⁶⁹ Also, the act made it possible for the crown to know which members of the clergy were more endowed than others, since the amount collected annually would reveal their income. But as ambitious and in need of funds as Henry VIII was, these funds were supplementary but not substantial enough, and the dissolution of the monastic orders would be the next resource to tap. We must keep in mind that at this time, Henry VIII was in need of resources to fund his wars against France and Scotland.

⁶⁷ “Act of Supremacy 1534,” Janz, ed., 285.

⁶⁸ J.J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, 338.

⁶⁹ Dickens and Carr, 65.

Prior to dissolution, however, a kind of audit would be necessary to survey and assess the wealth and holdings of the Church of England. Hence we have the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535, which was the result of an investigation into church property ordered by the Henrician government, which took approximately seven months to complete. The king's newly appointed vicar-general, Thomas Cromwell, was well aware that there had been no complete assessment of monastic holdings in over 200 years, and being wise to his king's desire for more revenue, sent auditors out to perform the task.⁷⁰ In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, England had been plagued with wars abroad and a war within their country, so there was little time for research into church holdings. Henry VIII, though at war for much of his reign, had more opportunity to order an investigation into church wealth. A full survey of the Benedictine Monastery at Peterborough is an excellent example of the findings of the document, especially since the Peterborough monastery was so wealthy.⁷¹ The document reveals nineteen regions belonging to the monastery, including farms, parishes, and any surrounding villages; their respective value and yearly production; and what would prospectively be owed to the crown. Though this type of information would have been complicated to gather, Dickens notes in a preface to the document that they are surprisingly mathematically accurate.⁷² How Dickens would know that is not clear, since there are really no other records to compare the findings to, but it is certain that every amount of revenue or anything of value was calculated right down to the penny, and the aim of the crown was to

⁷⁰ Baskerville, 120-3.

⁷¹ Dickens and Carr, *Extract from the Valor Ecclesiasticus (1535), relating to the Benedictine Monastery of Peterborough*, 90-93.

⁷² Dickens and Carr, *Extract from the Valor Ecclesiasticus (1535), relating to the Benedictine Monastery of Peterborough*, 90.

securing his line for the throne, which was clearly part of his plan for the Reformation. His suspicious nature only deepened with time, but even if only a few of the monastic orders disagreed with Henry VIII, it is only fitting with his personality that he be suspicious of all of them. But despite his forceful ways, he still found it at least minimally important to explain why the dissolution was a positive element of reform. Perhaps this was a result of his desire to be loved by the people, as well as feared.⁸⁸ Scarisbrick's assertion that "anti-clericalism needed Henry if it were to succeed and Henry now needed it," suggests that espousing anti-clerical propaganda was one of the ways Henry VIII could achieve support for his decision to dissolve the monasteries.⁸⁹ But regardless of the debate over whether or not England was plagued with anti-clerical sentiment, it is clear that Henry VIII was not afraid to employ it when it came to the dissolution of the monasteries.

The first act in 1536, the *Act for Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries*, dissolved any monastery that accumulated less than two hundred pounds annually. This was followed by the dissolution of the greater monasteries in 1539, which in more appropriate legal terms, was more of a surrender, and with that action monastic life in England ended forever. Henry VIII clearly uses some very anti-clerical phrases as justification for dissolving the monasteries, and he tries to make it clear that he did so out of a sense of duty as head of the Church of England.

The preface of the *Act for the Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries* begins not with a pronouncement of the crown's power over the church, or any suggestion that England desired to become more Protestant. Yet, the act reads like

⁸⁸ Neville Williams, *Henry VIII and His Court* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 47.

⁸⁹ Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, 245.

have the most accurate scientific representation possible. And almost every scholar notes how quickly the census took place, since the dissolutions began in 1536, and the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* was issued only a year prior. Having such a mobilization of census takers and commissioners must have alarmed the population that something was about to take place, since such an elaborate undertaking had not occurred in 200 years. However, not all scholars view the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* with the same importance.

Some scholars do not share the view that the gathering of such information was extraordinary in any way. Youings declares that “the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* points neither way and in any case whatever its future utility may have been there is no justification whatsoever for regarding it as anything more than a taxation assessment.”⁷³ The only way Youings can make such a claim is if she ignores the circumstances surrounding the undertaking. Perhaps if the census had occurred and nothing else, there would have been no cause for concern. However, the events that occurred beforehand, such as the break with Rome, removal of papal authority, and taxation via the *Act of First Fruits and Tenths*, all suggest a trend in the direction of the secular authority encroaching on the religious authority. It is likely that clergy became suspicious, since no study had been taken of monastic holdings in two centuries, and was of course the most likely move prior to dissolution. The *Valor Ecclesiasticus* was another step closer to dissolving the monasteries, which came almost immediately after the calculation of the census results. Elton’s assertion is completely correct that the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* “concentrated on the religious houses to such an extent that later opinion, and surviving evidence, have created the

⁷³ Youings, 37.

supposition that the whole affair was concerned solely with the monasteries and was exclusively intended as a prelude to their suppression.”⁷⁴ This statement is accurate because the information accumulated in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* supplied Cromwell and Henry VIII with the standard by which the first dissolutions took place. In 1536, the only monasteries dissolved were those that accumulated less than 200 pounds annually, which is information that the Henrician government would not have known without the benefit of a close survey of monastic holdings. Obtaining a record of their income, lands, and location, was only logical if the plan was dissolution.

The next phase in dissolving the monasteries was approached briefly in the previous chapter: the letters of Dr. Richard Layton and Mr. Thomas Legh known as the *Compendium Compertorum*, or simply, *comperta*. The origins of the study these men collected is fascinating, since it is widely known that Henry VIII’s vicar-general, Thomas Cromwell, had advised the investigators to seek negative findings.⁷⁵ The investigation began in the summer of 1535 and was completed by January, 1536. Dr. Cook provides us with a detailed account of the location and geographical consideration of the undertaking:

During the late summer of 1535 monasteries of the west country were visited; in October and November those of the eastern counties; in December houses in the Midlands, and early in January 1536 the commissioners reached the north. A large number escaped investigation, for the period of six or seven months was insufficient for visitations of all the houses in the land. Probably not more than one third were visited.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Elton, 233.

⁷⁵ Cook, 6.

⁷⁶ Cook, 4.

The kind of quick, surveillance conducted by Layton and Legh could not have resulted in accurate findings, and as a result, we should be skeptical of the contents of the letters to Cromwell. G.W.O. Woodward explains that the letters do not provide a correct reflection of all monasteries in England, since Dr. Layton and Mr. Legh were equipped with an agenda, and were inclined to find evidence to support their interests.⁷⁷ Elton is more forward when he explains, “none of them was anxious to give the institutions inspected the benefit of doubt or charity, and they knew that Cromwell wanted adverse reports.”⁷⁸ The investigations were conducted rapidly, and might have questionable findings, but what was written is important because it reveals the kind of campaign being launched against the monasteries. “It was part of Cromwell’s policy to promote anti-monastic feeling amongst the common people,” and in addition to sending out preachers and speakers to speak ill of the monasteries, he apparently advised Layton and Legh to contribute to the effort by reporting the religious houses to be in moral shambles, which they did.⁷⁹

One letter to Cromwell from Dr. Layton reveals a disturbing account of a bishop not adhering to his duties, and falling prey to sin. Layton tells Cromwell that after having interviewed several laypersons in the Syon Abbey in December of 1535, he discovered:

The said Bishop also persuaded a nun, to whom he was confessor, to submit her body to his pleasure, and thus he persuaded her in confession, making her believe that whensoever and as oft as they should meddle

⁷⁷ Woodward, 30-35.

⁷⁸ Elton, 234.

⁷⁹ Cook, 6.

together, if she were immediately confessed by him, and took of him absolution, she should be clear forgiven of God.⁸⁰

While this account might have been accurate, the nature of the investigation was so rapid and ill devised that no one will ever be certain. Also, the reputation Dr. Layton had for being an idle gossip does not lend any weight to the story.⁸¹ Although it is clear from the situations discussed in chapter three that England's monasteries were not without stain, if Dr. Layton and others were sent to gather stories of *Decameron* quality, we will never know for sure if they are accurate.

Another possible tactic employed by the investigators might have been portraying the monks and nuns as prisoners in their state, who burned with a secret desire for freedom. Dr. Legh, upon visiting Fordham priory, wrote this to Cromwell in November of 1535:

I desire you to send me word, what shall be done with these religious persons which kneeling on their knees, holding up their hands, instantly with humble petition desire of God, the King, and you, to be dismissed from their religion, saying they live in it contrary to God's law and their conscience, trusting that the King of his gracious goodness and you, will set them at liberty out of this bondage.⁸²

Perhaps these individuals really wanted escape from their monastic life, but if Henry VIII and Cromwell wanted to portray an image to the general population that secretly, the inhabitants of monasteries really wanted their freedom, this example, real or not, would have supported the claim. Cook does not discuss this letter in particular, nor does he provide much commentary for most of the

⁸⁰ Cook, ed., *Letter to Cromwell from Dr. Layton, mid-December, 1535*, 71-2.

⁸¹ Baskerville, 125.

⁸² Cook, ed., *Letter to Cromwell from Dr. Legh, November 1, 1535*, 63-64.

letters he includes. However, for the inhabitants of Fordham priory to say they are living against the law of God reflects sort of anti-Catholic sentiment, and they are admitting resentment for the monastic life, which was an invaluable part of the Catholic machine. While we do not know if Legh's words genuinely convey the sentiments of the inhabitants at Fordham, either they or he alone were suggesting anti-Catholic tendencies, which is a trend that will later be revisited in the words of Henry VIII and the *Acts for Dissolution*.

As far as the interrogations, the methods employed by Layton, Legh, and others must have been especially brutal, since some inhabitants of Lincolnshire and Yorkshire compared them to inquisitors, and demanded they be punished for their actions.⁸³ The very nature of the word inquisition implies that these men were tearing away at the people they questioned, and digging for certain answers that they wanted to hear. Midmer adds that, "where the charges were unsupported by fact the monks and nuns were accused of concealing the truth," so even if everyone was innocent, they were still implicated.⁸⁴ However, we need to keep in mind that some of the stories against the church may have been true, especially those where wrongdoing was admitted by the clergy, so while much of the reporting on behalf of the Henrician government was slanted, it was not necessarily unfounded.

But if the monasteries were in such a state of disarray, as Henry VIII reports in his *Acts for Dissolution*, why would the Henrician government have been so eager to collect and create adverse reports? Spreading rumors, that may or may not have been true, and sensationalizing claims against some of the monasteries

⁸³ Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, 340.

⁸⁴ Midmer, 25-6.

would only have been important in a land still attached to Catholicism. It is here that we see that an anti-Catholic campaign was necessary, and part of the reason why dissolving the monasteries and making the people believe they should be dissolved also was part of the plan for Reformation.

Each of the above documents built the bridge to monastic dissolution. The *Act of First Fruits and Tenths* was one of the initial attacks against the clergy, which allowed the crown to dip into Church funds. This was followed by the next step, the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, which was a formal survey of all church holdings that centered particularly on monastic property. Then the investigation into the monasteries, conducted under questionable circumstances, and what those letters revealed, was the final step prior to dissolving the monasteries.⁸⁵ After collecting all of the necessary information, the ultimate goal of dissolution could be realized, which would remove one of the most threatening sources of Catholic influence, which was part of Henry VIII's plan for Reformation.

⁸⁵ Midmer, 26-7.

CHAPTER V

MONASTIC DISSOLUTIONS AND HENRY VIII

While we know that the dissolution of the monasteries was accomplished in two separate stages, each of these documents reveal much about Henry VIII's motivations for monastic dissolution, and his harsh wording exudes a relatively anti-Catholic tone. Such a tone might be understandable and appropriate for the times if anti-clericalism was widespread, but for the most part the cases were few and far between. Scholars such as Haigh view anti-clericalism as an easy way through which historians can understand why the Reformation in England was allowed to occur at all. He claims, "anti-clericalism is just such a fiction, and owes its popularity to utility not veracity."⁸⁶ However, in Henry VIII's reasons for monastic dissolution, he lists a litany of sins, shortcomings, and a variety of examples of ill behavior. Even if these accusations did not reflect the nature of all religious houses, the accusations alone would be fitting with his suspicious character, and would not have been the first time he eliminated something because he felt threatened. For example, in 1538 he executed one of his cousins, Henry Courtenay the marquis of Exeter, for aiding his former wife Katharine of Aragon and possibly conspiring to have his own son take the throne instead of the son of Henry VIII.⁸⁷ Although there is no evidence to support such a conspiracy, the death of the marquis is an excellent example of the type of concern Henry had for

⁸⁶ Haigh, *The English Reformation Revised*, 56.

⁸⁷ Erickson, 288.

a pronouncement of judgment upon the monasteries for their wicked ways. It

states:

Forasmuch as manifest sin, vicious, carnal and abominable living is daily used and committed among the little and small abbeys, priories, and other religious houses of monks, canons, and nuns, where the congregation of such religious persons is under the number of twelve persons, whereby the governors of such religious houses and their convent, spoil, destroy, consume, and utterly waste, as well as their churches, monasteries, priories, principal houses, farms, granges, lands, tenements, and hereditenaments, as the ornaments of their churches, and their goods and chattels, to the high displeasure of Almighty God, slander of good religion, and to the great infamy of the King's Highness and the realm . . . [therefore] such small houses be utterly suppressed.⁹⁰

In this beginning passage, Layton and Legh's findings are alluded to, and the reader assumes that the ultimate reason for dissolving these monasteries is their overwhelming susceptibility to sin and overall failure as an institution. The first statement is broad, sweeping and makes no exception; whether or not any portion of the smaller abbeys should not have been lumped in the category of iniquity, all are implicated with the first line of the act. The Henrician government uses even stronger language to announce the worst of the lesser monasteries' sins, which includes causing the displeasure of God, the breaking down of the country, and listed finally, the disgrace to the crown. This is an awfully strong statement against the religious orders from a man once called "the defender of the faith," and with his words, he attacked the cherished institutions of that faith.⁹¹

Henry VIII further berates the smaller monasteries, by adding that "their vicious living shamelessly increaseth and augmenteth, and by a cursed custom so

⁹⁰ Dickens and Carr, eds., *Act for Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries, 1536* (27 Hen. VIII, c. 28), 98.

⁹¹ Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, 248-9.

rooted and infested, that a great multitude of the religious persons in such small houses do rather choose to rove abroad in apostasy, than to conform them to the observation of good religion.”⁹² This statement proclaims that the smaller monasteries are hopelessly drowning in a sea of sin, namely sins involving illicit sexual activity according to Layton and Legh’s letters to Cromwell, and that they are simply too far gone to reform or rejuvenate. What Henry VIII means by “good religion” is not terribly clear, since he had devoted much of his reign at that point in time to defiling the Catholic Church, all the while maintaining a healthy conservative aversion to Protestantism.

In addition, the members of these religious orders, however manifestly sinful, were to be transferred “to great and honourable monasteries” that were spared at that time.⁹³ It is odd that the method of reform the crown chose for these waywards was assimilation into other larger monasteries, since the larger monasteries were not necessarily flawless. If the crown’s main concern was spiritual reform, as it emphasizes early in the *Act for Dissolution*, perhaps the smaller monasteries should have been genuinely reformed instead of dissolved. Disciplining the smaller institutions might have been an option, but it was not a part of the type of Reformation Henry VIII had in mind. Dissolution was the step he needed to take; removal of the monastic orders would eliminate the possible foreign threat that existed there, and it would be a show of force that would be in perfect step with the rest of his reign.

⁹² Dickens and Carr, eds., *Act for the Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries*, 1536 (27 Hen. VIII, c. 28), 98.

⁹³ Dickens and Carr, eds., *Act for the Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries*, 1536 (27 Hen. VIII, c. 28), 98.

His classic assertion of authority is also shown with the attempts to justify the confiscation of these lands.⁹⁴ Henry VIII also adds that it was his responsibility to “reunite to the crown the goods which churchmen held of it, which his predecessors could not alienate to his prejudice, and that he was required to do this by the oath he had taken at his coronation.”⁹⁵ Henry’s statement reveals that he saw the dissolution of the monasteries as the return of land back to its rightful, secular owners. In other terms, the dissolution of the religious houses was the return of centuries of gifts to the crown, which it could either sell or profit from directly. Here, he is thereby revoking gifts of land that the church had accumulated over the years, which was yet another gesture of authority over the traditional faith.

As an individual, Henry VIII could certainly be classified as highly suspicious and demanded that his subjects be unified and loyal.⁹⁶ Their loyalty and obedience was integral to secure his authority, and he wanted his heir to assume the throne without any difficulty. The consolidation of power also involved fear and love on behalf of the people, and his concern that there might be the slightest degree of opposition made him resort to drastic actions. That could certainly be why he executed some of his closest advisors, such as Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell, but it was also reflected in his reasons for monastic dissolutions. The possible foreign threat that existed in the religious houses was another reason to dissolve the monasteries. When Henry VIII declared himself to be the supreme ruler over matters of state and church, England’s subjects were thereby cut off from papal authority, at least in theory. From that point on, foreign influences

⁹⁴ Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, 19-20.

⁹⁵ Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, 337.

⁹⁶ Knowles, *Bare Ruined Choirs: Dissolution of the English Monasteries*, 214-5.

throughout England were being sought out and removed, and one of the greatest sources of foreign influence was the monastic orders, especially the mendicant friars, which were addressed above. Most of the opposition to the break with Rome came from the monasteries, especially the Franciscan Observants, so the king was particularly concerned about their existence and their influence.⁹⁷ The Franciscan Observants had strong ties to Rome, and as a result of this were purged from England before any monastery was ever dissolved. Eliminating any foreign threat was part of Henry VIII's plan for Reformation, so the monasteries had to go.

In addition to political interests, the crown had financial reasons for dissolving the monasteries. The wealth the crown stood to gain was itself enough of a reason to dissolve the monasteries. The land would rightfully go to Henry VIII, as head of the Church of England, as is explained in this passage from the *Act for Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries*:

Finally be resolved, that it is and shall be much more to the pleasure of Almighty God, and for the honour of this realm, that the possessions of such spiritual and religious houses, now being spent, spoiled, and wasted for increase and maintenance of sin, should be used and converted to better uses, and the unthrifty religious persons so spending the same to be compelled to reform their lives: and thereupon most humbly desire the King's Highness that it may be enacted by authority of this present parliament, that his Majesty shall have and enjoy to him and to his heirs for ever, all and singular such monasteries, priories, and other religious houses of monks, canons, and nuns, of what kinds or diversities of habits, rules, or orders soever they be called or named, which have not in lands and tenements, rents, tithes, portions, and other hereditments, above the yearly value of two hundred pounds.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Peter Marshall, *Reformation England 1480-1642* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 45.

⁹⁸ Dickens and Carr, eds., *The Act for Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries, 1536* (27 Hen. VIII, c. 28), 98.

It is interesting that the Henrician government believed it would be “more to the pleasure of Almighty God” if the poorer monasteries were dissolved, and all of their assets turned over to the king. Such a statement goes along with the idea that God was in agreement with the actions exhibited by this monarch.⁹⁹ Although Henry’s wars with Scotland and France were expensive, desire for control of these assets was just another way to further his hand in church matters.

The final passages of the document make mention of the greater monasteries, who might have been concerned for their future. The crown addressed this concern by stating that “the said religious houses which his Highness shall not be disposed to have suppressed nor dissolved by authority of this Act, shall continue, remain, and be in the same body corporate, and in the said essential estate, quality, and condition, as well in possessions as otherwise, as they were afore the making of this Act.”¹⁰⁰ While it is true that the greater monasteries were not altered so much by the dissolution of the less profitable religious houses, it is certainly not true that everything would be the same as it was before they were dissolved. We can be certain that the crown had full intention of dissolving all monasteries, because if a threat existed at all, certainly it would not have been extinguished by closing the smaller houses alone. This author suggests that the blow to the regular population might have been softened if the dissolutions were done in stages as they were. Clearly, by the time the greater monasteries were dissolved, the Pilgrimage of Grace had already occurred and its instigators executed.

⁹⁹ Erickson, 252.

¹⁰⁰ Dickens and Carr, eds., *The Act for Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries, 1536* (27 Hen. VIII, c. 28), 101.

The dissolution of the greater monasteries occurred under different circumstances than that of the lesser monasteries. In 1539, it was more a matter of surrender than a declaration of dissolution. The beginning of the document states:

Where divers and sundry abbots, priors, abbesses, prioresses, and other ecclesiastical governors and governesses of divers monasteries, abbacies, priories, nunneries, colleges, hospitals, house of friars, and other religious and ecclesiastical houses and places within this our Sovereign Lord the King's realm of England and Wales, of their free and voluntary minds, good wills and assents, without constraint, coaction, or compulsion of any manner of person or persons, since the fourth day of February, the twenty-seventh year of the reign of our now most dread Sovereign Lord, by the due order and course of the common laws of this realm of England, and by their sufficient writings of record, under their convent and common seals, have severally given, granted, and by the same their writings severally confirmed all their said monasteries.¹⁰¹

By this time, there were no accusations of impropriety or sinful behavior. Instead, Henry VIII declared that it was the desire on behalf of the remaining monasteries to give up their holdings to the crown. Though the greater monasteries were “surrendered,” it is still viewed by all English Reformation historians as the “second dissolution,” because all are fairly certain that without coercion and threat, they would not have surrendered. This final dissolution document bestowed upon the king, the land and property of all of the remaining religious houses, colleges, and any other monastic belonging. However, the act cannot realistically be viewed as a surrender that was “without constraint or compulsion,” for it is certainly unreasonable to think that the Henrician government never compelled these monasteries to cease their function, and turn over everything they had to the crown. Still, the wording of the document is designed to make the change seem like

¹⁰¹ Dickens and Carr, eds., *The Act for Dissolution of the Greater Monasteries, 1539* (31 Hen. VIII, c. 13), 105.

surrender, stating that “to our said Sovereign Lord, his heirs and successors for ever, and the same their said monasteries and other premises, voluntarily, as is aforesaid, have renounced, left, and forsaken, and every of them hath renounced, left and forsaken . . . all and singular such said monasteries.”¹⁰² They were to forfeit everything to the crown, which all did uniformly, even if it was done under the disguise of surrender. Such an act displays the kind of control Henry VIII enjoyed, which he had bestowed upon himself with the *Act of Supremacy*.

Although most historians admit that formal government documents do not necessarily reflect the intentions or desires of that ruler, in the case of Henry VIII, it might be more possible to assume that they do. It is vital to remember that Henry VIII, whose personal ambitions caused him to change the religious affiliation of his country, remained stern and determined to unify his country under any circumstances, and eliminate any potential treasonous activity.¹⁰³ Much of the reason Henry VIII began the Reformation in England was to create an heir to the throne, which would secure his line. He wanted to create a heroic line of kings that the country could be proud of, and stern rule was necessary for this to come to pass.¹⁰⁴ The words of the *Act of Supremacy* clearly reflect a king concerned with consolidation of power and authority, which was part of the plan for reform. Yet some chose to react in clear opposition to the changes he made. While it is true that some accepted these alterations in tradition, regions such as Lincolnshire and

¹⁰²Dickens and Carr, eds., *The Act for Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries, 1536* (27 Hen. VIII, c. 28), 106.

¹⁰³ Steven G. Ellis, “Henry VIII, Rebellion and the Rule of Law” *The Historical Journal* 24:3 (1981) 513-31.

¹⁰⁴ Williams, 235.

Yorkshire were not so passive.¹⁰⁵ Henry VIII's swift response to their rebellion is another example of his desire for control, unity, and suppression of any threatening entity.

¹⁰⁵ Haigh, *Reformation and Resistance in Tudor Lancashire*, 118.

CHAPTER VI

PUBLIC REACTION TO THE DISSOLUTION OF THE MONASTERIES AND THE KING'S RESPONSE

There were a variety of reactions to the dissolution of the monasteries. In certain regions of the country, the people seemed to be distraught at the news that their monastery would be dissolved, namely in the northern towns of Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. In reaction to the dissolution of the monasteries, several individuals decided on a mass protest, and participated in the Pilgrimage of Grace. Some scholars discount the importance of the Pilgrimage of Grace, asserting that all the Pilgrimage of Grace accomplished was the delay of overtaking a few of the monasteries in the north.¹⁰⁶ However, it is still a phenomenon of some importance, since it provided the king another opportunity to show force and assert his authority over those who tried to cling to the traditional faith that Henry's decisions during his reign had ended. In other areas of the country, the people actively engaged in the destruction of the monasteries, tearing down the walls, taking as many valuables as they could carry, and generally defiling their local religious houses. And others, the silent majority as Eamon Duffy has suggested, if they felt betrayed by their king or upset by the dissolution, chose to do nothing and silently accept the decision made by their sovereign.¹⁰⁷ This variety of reactions is puzzling, but the stern response made by the king to those who opposed him again

¹⁰⁶ Youings, 54.

¹⁰⁷ Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 41.

reflects his strength and determination, and motivation to stamp out enemies, which in this case were those who desired to keep their monasteries, as well as the Catholic faith.

The most discussed form of protest to the dissolution of the monasteries was the Pilgrimage of Grace, led by Robert Aske, late in the year 1536. This uprising, concentrated primarily in the northern regions of England, including Lincolnshire and Yorkshire, consisted of people with differing motives, and had no uniform cause. For the purposes of this study, however, their concern for the monasteries and faithful adherence to the Catholic faith are particularly relevant. D.M. Palliser gives the best description of the Pilgrimage of Grace when he states: “The Pilgrimage of Grace has become an umbrella term for the five northern risings in the autumn and winter of 1536-7, but is more properly used of the main rising in October 1536, which was ostensibly a protest against royal policies and in defense of the Church.”¹⁰⁸ Aske, the spiritual leader of the rebellion, was a passionate Catholic who was genuinely disturbed by the changes that were being made in his country. He thought that the dissolution of the monasteries would erode the country’s spirituality and connection with God, and declared that “by occasion of the said suppression the divine service of Almighty God is much minished, great number of masses unsaid, and the blessed consecration of the sacrament now not used and showed in those places, to the distress of the faith, and spiritual comfort to man’s soul, the temple of God.”¹⁰⁹ In addition to the moral and spiritual decay of the country, Aske was concerned that the people in the less populated areas would

¹⁰⁸ D.M. Pallister, “Popular Reactions to the Reformation,” *English Reformation Revised*, 96.

¹⁰⁹ Dickens and Carr, *Robert Aske on the Dissolution of the Monasteries*, 102-103.

suffer the most since they were so far away from any spiritual leadership now that their local monastery had been removed. His concerns fell on deaf ears, however, and the uprisings did not accomplish very much, save for recognition that not everyone was on board with the king's decision to break with the traditional faith of the country, and dissolve the monasteries.

This does not diminish the importance of the Pilgrimage of Grace, though, since it was clearly an act of open defiance against the king and the changes he was making, which was particularly brave considering the king's reputation for stern rule and harsh treatment of traitors. Scarisbrick goes so far as to assert that the Pilgrimage of Grace could have been a powerful and subversive force, if it were not for the participants' loyalty to the king. He declares that "the king was saved not so much by the loyalty of his friends as by the loyalty of his rebels."¹¹⁰ Apparently, Aske and others would simply not allow the movement to spread any further, when in fact many members of the pilgrimage wanted to sweep down south and use force to reclaim these religious houses. Being a peaceful man, Aske wanted "to plead with the King, not bury him," but it made no difference to Henry VIII.¹¹¹ The king recognized the pilgrimage as a threat and dealt with the rebels and "traytours" with decisive force.

The uprising was not to be tolerated, and in a swift and merciless response to Aske and his activities, King Henry VIII ordered his execution in July of 1537. As for the regions of Lincolnshire and Yorkshire, Henry's stern response to their efforts was an example of his strength and force he was not afraid to show, and his

¹¹⁰ Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People*, 342.

¹¹¹ Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People*, 342.

desire to root out any opposition. Henry's aim was to create a dynasty, and loyalty was important. He eliminated the monasteries under the same circumstances, and those who dared to fight for their existence must also have treasonous spirits, since they longed to cling to the faith that Henry VIII made clear no longer had a place in England. He was head of the Church now, so any show of loyalty to the old faith was deemed treasonous.

In addition to concerns about the church, the rebels had other issues they presented to the king, and his reply was issued in two declarations. In his reply to Lincolnshire's rebels, he declares them to be "the most brute and beastly of the hole realm, and of least experience, to find fault with your prince . . . whom ye are bound by all laws to obey and serve with both your lives, lands and goods."¹¹² He is appalled by the gall exerted by those who dared to protest him, which acts in accordance with his classic concern for loyalty and suspicious nature. He addresses their concerns in regard to the dissolution of the monasteries by replying that, "As to the suppression of religious houses and monasteries . . . ye and all our subjects should well know, that this is graunted us by all the nobles spiritual and temporal of this our realm, and . . . by act of parliament."¹¹³ Though the rebels are upset by the recent destruction of the monasteries, the king is attempting to convey his official justification for doing so. In addition to noting it was in fact an act of parliament, he also asserts that many of the nobles and members of the religious hierarchy were behind him in this effort. This might have been an attempt to lend further legitimacy to his decisions, since public support was important if he wanted

¹¹² T. Bertheleti, *Answer to the Petitions of the traytours and rebelles in Lyncolnshyre, 1536*.

¹¹³ T. Bertheleti, *Answer to the Petitions of the traytours and rebelles in Lyncolnshyre, 1536*.

to be viewed as a powerful ruler in a glorious dynasty.¹¹⁴ While that might mean little to the rebels who seem to just want the return of tradition, Henry is making at least a limited effort to justify the decisions made other than simply saying “because I wish it personally.” In the final section of the answer, Henry VIII brings the will of God into the matter by asserting that “to rebel and unlawfully rife against your prince, [is] contrary to your duty of allegiance and gods commandment.”¹¹⁵

Though Henry was the self-appointed head of the Church of England with parliamentary approval, rebellion against the king was the same as rebellion against God and his will. Claiming God was on his side in reference to all of the steps he was taking for reform was a theme he used quite often, including when he dissolved the monasteries.¹¹⁶ His language, both and stern and resolute, showed his contempt for the traitors, and allowed no room for compromise.

In Yorkshire, his attitude was no different, and he had no recognition or discussion of their pleas or concerns, though their aversion to the crown’s rulings was crystal clear. He begins again by diminishing them in stating that “they being ignorant people, be for presumptuous to take upon them to correct us all therein; or that they would be for ingrate and unnatural towards us, they most rightful king and sovereign lord.”¹¹⁷ Here, Henry VIII is noting how improper it is for unlearned and inexperienced individuals to be advising him on how to conduct government, especially in regard to religious concerns. In a more aggressive portrayal of his

¹¹⁴ Williams, 70.

¹¹⁵ T. Bertheleti, *Answere to the Petitions of the traytours and rebelles in Lyncolnshyre, 1536*.

¹¹⁶ Dickens and Carr, eds., *Act for the Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries, 1536* (27 Hen.VIII, c. 28), 101.

¹¹⁷ T. Bertheleti, *Answere made by the Kynges Hyghnes to the petitions of the rebelles in Yorkshire, 1536*.

authority, he suggests that they resign themselves to his decisions by asserting that, “If you will humbly knowledge your fault, and submit your selves to our mercy, we intend to do, as by our proclamations.”¹¹⁸ It is clear that no matter what the rebels do, no matter how many pilgrimages or objections they make, the king will have his way. He chides them further by stating that “what hurt you have in this little time done unto your selves,” and encourages them to accept the change and “learn by this gentle reformation.”¹¹⁹ He makes clear that no organized effort would sway his opinion, and he held nothing but contempt for those who dared defy him and openly disagree with his new decisions. Traitors would not be tolerated, which was something Aske and others learned. Henry VIII had made such drastic reforms to his country that he had no choice but to be stern and resolute if he wanted to maintain order and loyalty. Destroying the monasteries and eliminating papal authority were austere changes that certainly could have ignited a sea of rebellion, and Henry had to reinforce his decisions by making it clear that no compromise would be made. Those that chose to make their displeasure known had to feel the wrath of their sovereign. The language of the answers to the traitors and rebels at Yorkshire and Lincolnshire was unforgiving and harsh, but serve as excellent examples of Henry VIII’s attitude and resilience in reference to his people, and his plan for reformation.

¹¹⁸ T. Bertheleti, *Answer to the Petitions of the traytours and rebelles in Lyncolnshyre, 1536.*

¹¹⁹ T. Bertheleti, *Answer to the Petitions of the traytours and rebelles in Lyncolnshyre, 1536.*

CHAPTER VII
SUPPORT FOR HENRY VIII: ANTI-CATHOLIC EVIDENCE IN
LITERATURE AND ACTION

While some chose to participate in the Pilgrimage of Grace, or silently accept the changes made by the Henrician government, some openly supported the king through the written word or with action. Some of these publications and acts cannot be construed any other way except as an expression against Catholicism. Examples of literature of the day herald the triumph of their king over papist rule and Romish trappings, with an almost sycophantic style. This kind of unconditional obedience to the religious changes he made was what Henry VIII desired. While much of the population was illiterate, the tone of the literature often reflects the desire on the part of the author to convince their fellow subjects that the break with Rome was both honorable and liberating. However, some people did not need much coercion, since there exist many examples of individuals who gleefully participated in dismantling the monasteries, one of the most stirring of which was the incident regarding the Abbey of Hailes.¹²⁰ While Henry himself felt no attachment to Protestant teachings, he advocated some relatively anti-Catholic policies, such as the rejection of papal authority and the monastic dissolutions, and his most zealous supporters seemed to share the anti-Catholic sentiment.

¹²⁰ Shagan, 162.

It is difficult to make any definite conclusions about the effects of anti-Catholic literature on the population, but Reformation literature is not often discounted. In reference to the printed word, "Protestantism surely was the first fully to exploit its potential as a mass medium."¹²¹ This was especially true in regard to anti-Catholic propaganda, which was widely printed, and present in the examples we will examine. However, since there is no way to gauge their influence, their relevance to this study is the examples of support for the king that they provide. Their level of loyalty and blind devotion to Henry VIII, and the new policies he initiated, were clearly the kind of support Henry desired.

While there is no clear information about the life of T. Swinnerton, we can glean from his writing that he had a genuine problem with those who wanted to cling to the traditional religion. His work, *A litel treatise ageynste the mutterynge of some papists in corners*, is clearly a propaganda piece in favor of the reform that was initiated by the king in the same year of the work's publication. It is clear that Swinnerton is not opposed to the king usurping the role as head of the church; instead, he declares that, "some were so blinded, that they thought it should be against our faith, to forsake the pope, but I think they, that so supposed did put more their trust in the pope, then in Christ."¹²² His insinuation is clear; if you were upset or disturbed by the king taking the place as the head of the church, you were guilty of holding the pope at an inappropriate level. He adds that Christians must remember that the pope's authority is not bestowed by God, "but he had it granted

¹²¹ Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 303-4.

¹²² T. Swinnerton, *A litel treatise ageynste the mutterynge of some papists in corners*, 1534. (Microfilm; Pollard and Redgrave, reel 19177).

him by kynges and princis.”¹²³ Also, mere tradition was not enough to justify clinging to the old religion. Swinnerton asserts that, “let no man prefer custom afore reason and truth: for always reason and truth putteth custom out of place.”¹²⁴ He admonishes those who would blindly cling to tradition, and charges the people to “honour thy king,” which he supplements by noting that such deference is in accordance with biblical teaching. Swinnerton’s writings clearly support the king’s decisions, but with an anti-Catholic tone.

Another author, T. Godfray, praises Henry VIII even more flamboyantly in the work, *A panegyric of Henry VIII as the abolisher of papist abuses*, published the same year as the destruction of the lesser monasteries. Godfray, whose life and influence remain a mystery, is glad to report that the pope is no longer the head of the church, asserting that, “the abuse is well reformed, for now is our prince Henry the eight supreme heed of this his church of England, as he is worthy.”¹²⁵ It is certain that everyone did not share the belief that Henry VIII was worthy to be head of any church, but Godfray’s tone is jubilant and relieved, since the ties to Rome have been dissolved, as well as some of the institutions of the traditional church.

His closing remarks encourage his fellow subjects to join him in the celebration, instructing all, “Now let us rejoyce and be glad for the eternal god hath raised to us a loving king; a king that hath the word of God in great reverence.”¹²⁶ In addition to being thrilled with this religious change, Godfray is also instructing his fellow subjects to trust the king’s judgment, suggesting that Henry VIII is

¹²³ Swinnerton, 1534.

¹²⁴ Swinnerton, 1534.

¹²⁵ T. Godfray, *A panegyric of Henry VIII as the abolisher of papist abuses, 1536-1537* (Microfilm; Pollard and Redgrave, reel 13084 A).

¹²⁶ Godfray, 1536-1537.

sincere, knowledgeable in religious matters, and would always have the best interest of his subjects in mind. The extent to which Godfray convinced other subjects cannot be gauged in any way, yet his work is an example of enthusiastic support for the king and his policies, and clearly refers to papal authority as an “abuse.” His work was an attempt to justify and rejoice in the changes initiated by the Henrician government, and whether or not anti-clericalism was a reality, a topic on which many scholars do not agree, Godfray’s work does suggest that some people were not so attached to Catholicism and the monastic orders, and were ready to provide the king with the loyalty he demanded from his subjects.

Thomas Starkey, who is identified as one of the king’s advisors and friend of Reginald Pole, authored a work that also speaks glowingly of the king and his policies.¹²⁷ In his work, *An Exhortation to the people, instructynge theym to unitie and obedience*, Starkey is responding to the recent uprisings that have developed against the king as a result of the changes occurring. Starkey’s work, like that of Swinnerton, employs the idea that obedience and subjection to the rule of the king is in accordance with the law of God.¹²⁸ Again, we see the theme of “God’s will,” which was frequently employed by Henry VIII and his followers, as was pointed out above. As an advisor of the king, could Starkey have been asked to author this publication in an attempt to strike up support for the king? There is no evidence of this, but his concerns and demands mirror that of the king’s. Henry also wrote about loyalty, obedience, and strict adherence to his authority: all of which were essential to his plan for Reformation. To Starkey, breaking the laws of the land or

¹²⁷ Youings, 168-9.

¹²⁸ Thomas Starkey, *An Exhortation to the people, instructynge theym to unitie and obedience*, 1536. (Microfilm; Pollard and Redgrave, reel 23236).

openly defying the king is unscriptural, and only complete obedience is “the perfection of a Christian mind.”¹²⁹ How many people heeded the advice of Starkey is unclear, but his publication is important in that he recognizes a need to advise his fellow subjects to be obedient to the king, and reject the traditional church, as the king demanded.

While literature was important, and helps us to understand the tactics Henry’s supporters used, the actions on behalf of the people reveal much about the type of support he received from the regular, perhaps illiterate, population. Some individuals can be described as having overzealous enthusiasm, which was reinforced by active participation in such Reformation changes as the dissolution of the monasteries. The situation that occurred in regard to the Abbey of Hailes, which was referred to early in the study, was one of the most astonishing examples of a public display of disdain and disrespect for a religious house, and suggests a genuine anti-Catholic sentiment when the people opted to physically bring the monasteries down. When the order to destroy the Abbey of Hailes was delivered in 1541, the people in the surrounding area wasted no time in helping to destroy the structure and abscond with anything of value. The event was so pivotal that the Henrician Government decided to launch an investigation into the destruction of the abbey in the fall of 1542.¹³⁰ Royal records indicate that after the visits of the looting mob, the abbey was virtually unrecognizable. Anything of value was confiscated, including elaborate window lattices, iron hinges, objects made of lead,

¹²⁹ Starkey, 1536.

¹³⁰ Shagan, 161-3.

doors, shelves, locks, and a great many other items not identified.¹³¹ Royal investigators were able to conclude that all social classes were represented in the destructive party, from the wealthiest to the most destitute. Are we to conclude that these were simple acts of obedience to the king and his plan for Reform, or were the greedy locals just participating in a looting rampage? Either way, their actions were clearly anti-Catholic, in that they were defiling what was once a holy edifice.

Abbeys in Yorkshire also endured looting mobs, which is particularly interesting because Yorkshire was also the site of some of the strongest proponents of the Pilgrimage of Grace, the largest movement in objection to the dissolution of the monasteries. Michael Sherbrook, a clergyman from one of the Yorkshire Abbeys, wrote a letter in 1538 to a friend describing his involvement in the destruction. As one of the looters, he claimed a weak defense for his actions by stating, "Might I not as well as others have some profit of the spoil of the abbey? For I did see all would away; and therefore I did as others did."¹³² Sherbrook might have been carried away by the looting mob, but his response to the dissolution of the very abbey he once served was to tear into it, like others were, and take what material benefits he could from the structure. As a member of the clergy, one might have suspected Sherbrook would harbor a little more respect and love for the faith he once swore an oath to, yet he was quick to disregard that and act in accordance with the reforms. Such an action might reflect human greed and nothing more, but it also might suggest that Sherbrook was committed to his king, and was therefore ready to shed the trappings of the old religion, as ordered, with no question.

¹³¹ Shagan, 162.

¹³² Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People*, 70.

Whether we examine literature or the action of the people, we can be certain that support for Henry VIII's Reformation existed. Although there is no way to know how many people read or were inspired by the words of Godfray, Swinnerton, and Starkey, we know they were all three concerned with convincing their fellow subjects to stand behind their king, and reject the traditional faith. And the physical participation of dismantling the monasteries might have been selfish acts, but also could have been the result of an obedient reaction to the decisions of their king, which he demanded, as he made clear to the rebels at Lincolnshire and Yorkshire. Their actions could also be construed as anti-Catholic in nature, an example that the king had set for them by rejecting papal authority and replacing it with his own, and of course, through the elimination of the monasteries.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION: REVISITING HENRY VIII'S REFORMATION

Scholars will continue to debate the relevance of the monastic institutions in the early-sixteenth century, but whether or not they performed their functions as religious institutions is really not as important as the fact that they represented England's Catholic history, and therefore their removal was integral to Henry VIII's plan for Reformation. While the true moral fiber of the religious houses remains uncertain, any evidence suggesting sinful behavior helped justify their removal, and investigations into their holdings were the logical precursor to dissolution.

The declarations of 1534, in the *Act of Supremacy*, forecasted the kind of power Henry VIII enjoyed over the Church of England, and with papal authority extinguished, he was able to make such a drastic change as dissolving the religious houses. If England was full of faithful Catholics prior to the Reformation, as Scarisbrick, Haigh, and Duffy declare, then dissolving the monasteries was necessary to attempt to erase anything that might strengthen or further endear the population to the traditional faith. It is clear that it was Henry VIII's nature and character to be suspicious and concerned about the loyalty of his subjects, and if the monks and nuns in the monasteries had the reputation for disloyalty or treason, as some of them did, then their existence could not be tolerated.

Henry's plan for Reformation began with his concern over producing an heir: he was occupied with maintaining the Tudor dynasty, and making it as

glorious and triumphant as possible. Through the houses of parliament he secured his authority over secular and spiritual matters, and demanded loyalty. There was hardly room for compromise under the reign of Henry VIII.

And, when some decided to revolt and rebel against the king's actions, as they did in Lincolnshire and Yorkshire, his reprisal was needed. His actions were so drastic and so subversive, like the dissolution of the monasteries, that allowing any rebellious behavior or open defiance would have weakened his new claim as head of the Church. His harsh language and demands for loyalty in his response to the traitors and rebels at Lincolnshire and Yorkshire reinforce this claim.

There can almost be an understanding of why Henry VIII demanded such unabashed loyalty, and stayed so paranoid. His Reformation was so unique, and so upsetting to other leaders, that he had no choice but to be concerned about loyalty and unity. He was not afraid to execute those whom he suspected of treason, and had many enemies at home and abroad. Even his daughter, Elizabeth I, as a monarch encountered foreign difficulty over England's Reformation. And though Henry VIII was not a staunch advocate of Protestantism, it is interesting to note that he, and some of his most enthusiastic supporters, did employ some anti-Catholic rhetoric. If the monasteries were sources of division and detraction, certainly their removal was integral to Henry's plan for Reformation. In his plan, he became the head of the Church, and the ultimate spiritual and temporal authority. And from that point forward, his chief concerns were maintaining that authority, and the best way to do that was to distance his people from the traditional religion as much as possible. In order to distance them, dissolving the monasteries became part of the

plan, and while some supported the move completely, and others objected, the monasteries were dissolved, and that significant part of Henry VIII's plan for Reformation was realized.

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