**Change and Continuity in Tudor England**

There’s a saying about New England weather: if you don’t like it, wait five minutes and it will probably change. The same could be said about Tudor England. Though monarchs like Henry VII, Henry VIII, and Elizabeth I had multi-decade reigns which may have offered some stability in state figures, the events that unfolded during most of the Tudor Era could be seen as anything but constant. Religious turmoil compounded with the changes instituted by new monarchs on top of changes within the attitudes amongst Englishmen and women meant that Tudor England experienced a society-altering event once every few years. It is true that some constants, such as divides among the people, remained the same. However, what stands out the most about Tudor England is change, not continuity.

The Tudor era was riddled with constant changes in the monarchy and Susan Brigden notes that “[t]he succession of each new monarch brought a new world, for the character of a king determined not only policy but also the style of government.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The ascension of Henry VII not only meant a new monarch but also a new dynasty and the end of the War of the Roses. While the common people of the time did not see themselves as affected by the dynastic change[[2]](#footnote-2), it is a change nonetheless. Henry VII also established changes at his court that would last outlive him, including the separation of the privy chamber. Brigden notes that this separation was “an innovation little remarked at the time, but of great political consequence.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The length of Henry VII’s rule may have offered a stable figurehead to a generation, but overall his court brought a great deal of change.

The beginning of Henry VIII’s reign was stable. The reformation had not yet begun and his marriage to Catherine of Aragon was steady. However, around 1530 England witnessed rapid and extensive changes. Within the span of six years, the Royal Supremacy created the Church of England, Henry divorced Catherine of Aragon, married Anne Boelyn, executed Anne Boelyn, and replaced her with Jane Seymour who died a year later. Also within this time, Cromwell began to work on establishing Royal Supremacy: “Parliament would be used to make laws to enshrine Royal Supremacy and national sovereignty, with the assent of the King’s subjects, or, at least, the illusion of it.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Furthering the idea of Royal Supremacy, it also became a crime to disagree with the king.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The second half of Henry’s reign (also the second half of his wives) brought additional changes to court. When Anne of Cleves arrived and the king found her disgusting, he divorced yet another wife. After that, the marriage and execution of Catherine Howard pushed Henry towards Catholicism. “There was no retreat from reform until 1543, when the new alliance with the Emperor for a common assault on France made Henry anxious to assert his orthodoxy.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This was a pendulum shift, and England was creeping back towards Catholicism. However, once Henry married Katherine Parr the pendulum turned back to Protestantism, as Katherine preferred the Reformation and enjoyed educating the ladies in her chambers on the new religion.[[7]](#footnote-7) Once again, within the span of a few years England saw multiple changes in different directions to its national religion. This trend remained steady, as England would be pushed and pulled between Catholicism and Protestantism many times over the next seventy years.

Upon Henry’s death, England found itself with a new king who had much stronger Protestant values. Edward pushed England deeper into the Reformation and Brigden notes “[t]he most radical reformation yet in religion began, in part because Edward willed it.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The Book of Common Prayer was a major development and move into Protestantism for England. According to Brigden “[t]he loss of the elevation at the sacring (the moment of greatest power and benediction), of the pax, of the sharing of holy bread; the obliteration of the great cycle of feast days dedicated to the celestial army of saints; the use of English instead of Latin; and the clear reforming impulse which lay behind the new rite, made the Book of Common Prayer an abomination to all of conservative mind.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Here, the very amount of changes caused by a single book is exemplified. During Mary’s reign six years later, all of these changes and steps towards Protestantism came undone. Mary was a devout Catholic as her mother had been, and in 1553 she repealed Edward’s laws in parliament as well as some of the laws her father instituted.[[10]](#footnote-10) The switch is exemplified by Robert Parkyn’s Narrative of the Reformation: “So to be brief, all old ceremonies laudably used beforetime in holy church was then revived, daily frequented, and used.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Only five years after that, the Church of England would be reinstated after Elizabeth was crowned as queen.

The return to Protestantism may have been the last doctrinal change that occurred during the period, but England saw the rise of multiple religious sects within the Reformers and the Papists during Elizabeth’s reign; the Calvinists and Puritans, for example, rose to popularity during this time. The idea of religious sects was not new to Tudor England; Enlgand had multiple religious sects for a couple of decades as a result of the Reformation. However, the number of sects that were popularized during this time is a change in its own way and brought further change to the religious landscape in England. “In the mid 1590s the foundations and consensuality of Elizabethan Protestantism were assaulted, and dangerous crypto-papist doctrines came to threaten the peace of the Church.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Despite the state religion remaining the same, the religious landscape continued to evolve.

In addition to the massive and numerous religious changes in Tudor England, the way that people interacted with the nobility and monarchy changed as well. Building on momentum from the Renaissance, “the relationship between scholars and rulers is re-conceived.”[[13]](#footnote-13) This brought more educated voices to court, including Sir Thomas More. The Protestant Reformation also gave the commoners and gentry a voice and opinion, although this was inadvertent. People began to voice their opinions on religious matters to the king, which was not well tolerated by Henry[[14]](#footnote-14). One example of this comes from the Answer of the Ordinaries. The bishops wrote to the king: “To this article we say that…we repute and take our authority of making of laws to be grounded upon the Scripture of God and the determination of Holy Church…”[[15]](#footnote-15) This change in how the monarchs were spoke to led to a form of continuity in England and many were killed during the reigns of Henry VIII, Mary, and Elizabeth for religious defiance.

The nobility found their role in the realm changing as well. Before the Tudor Era, nobles were strong fighters who could raise armies against the king if necessary. Unfortunately, however by the time the War of the Roses ended the very dynamics of the noble families changed: “[t]he destruction during the last few years of the greatest English magnates – Clarence, Neville, Buckingham, Hastings – had left the major noble families leaderless.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Over the course of the Tudor Dynasty, nobles continued to lose any battle prowess that they had and by the end of Elizabeth’s reign, the nobility were a group of men who held influence over monarchy and the court, but could no longer fight it. Brigden goes so far as to note that the ascension of Mary over Lady Jane Grey was “the only successful popular rising of the century”[[17]](#footnote-17) despite several noble led rebellions such as Essex’s Rebellion and Wyatt’s Rebellion.

With so many changes, England had one constant through the Tudor reign: division. Instead of fighting for the rightful heir as they did during the War of the Roses, people were fighting for the rightful religion. “In the courts of Europe the nobility fought not for power alone but for the faith, Catholic or Reformed, and urged radical action in political circumstances in which neutrality grew harder to sustain.”[[18]](#footnote-18) While this was a trend all over Europe, its prominence in England cannot be overlooked. The fighting and plotting at court, as well as amongst the commoners and gentry, was more prominent during this time than the boots-on-ground battles were. That being said, they still led to the result of executions. Two excellent examples of this would be Anne Boelyn and Thomas Cromwell. Anne’s death did not come about because she was captured on a battlefield, but because the king was growing tired of her and the people across the aisle (and on her side, such as Cromwell) took advantage of that.[[19]](#footnote-19) Cromwell plotted to remove Anne and all her allies – despite the religion and ideals for the commonwealth he shared with them. Ironically, Cromwell faced a similar fate: after disappointing Henry with the marriage to Anne of Cleves, the Howards saw an opening.[[20]](#footnote-20)

England went through a lot between 1485 and 1603. It faced a wide variety of monarchs who all brought their own personal beliefs and political style to the nation. It faced a reformation that divided the faithful into a variety of religious sects over the course of seventy years. Typically, change is easier to point out than continuity because we notice when something is off more than we do when things are always the same. In Tudor England, however, it’s hard to say that continuity stands out against the sweeping changes made.

1. Susan Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds: The Rule of the Tudors 1485 - 1603* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2000. Kindle Edition), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds,* 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds,* 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds*, 118 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds,* 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds,* 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds,* 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds*, 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds,* 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds*, 200 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Robert Parkyn, “Narrative of the Reformation,” in *Sources and Debates in English History: 1485-1714*, ed. Newton Key and Robert Bucholz (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds,* 335. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds,* 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Newton Key and Robert Bucholz, *Sources and Debates in English History: 1485-1714*, (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “Answer of the Ordinaries,” in *Sources and Debates in English History: 1485-1714*, ed. Newton Key and Robert Bucholz (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds,* 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds,* 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds,* 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds,* 123-124. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds,* 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)