

## The Renaissance (1485-1625)

### The Historical and Social Context

#### ▪ **The Tudor dynasty**

Henry Tudor defeated the last Yorkist, Richard III, in the Wars of the Roses and became King Henry VII in 1485. He was not a member of the royal family, so he needed to justify his new dynasty. Propaganda was written to support the Tudors. They were concerned with legitimacy and security. Any rival to the throne had to be ruthlessly destroyed.

Henry VII restored the reputation of the monarch as one who rules, not merely reigns. He encouraged both trade, making advantageous commercial treaties, and the cloth industry. He also laid the foundations of English naval power by spending money on the building of ships. He sponsored the voyage from Bristol of John Cabot in 1497 which led to the discovery of the North American mainland.

Henry VII was succeeded by his son, Henry VIII in 1509. Henry was an accomplished musician and linguist; he was surrounded by a cultured and splendid court. The second half of his reign was dominated by the Reformation. The dissolution of the monasteries brought great wealth to the crown, but much of it was dissipated by inflation and the expenditure of war. Henry VIII had six wives.

On Henry VIII's death in 1547, his son Edward, a scholarly, devout but sickly 9-year-old, became King as Edward VI; his uncle, Edward Seymour, became Lord Protector.

When his half-sister became Queen as Mary I in 1553, she was determined to restore relations with Rome and Spain. Mary I earned the nickname "Bloody Mary" because of the number of Protestants that were burned for heresy during her reign.

Elisabeth I succeeded her sister Mary in 1558 and became England's most popular ruler. Her main achievement was the settlement of the religious question. Catholics considered Elisabeth illegitimate and preferred Mary Queen of Scots, but Elisabeth's spies always found them out. Elisabeth was well educated and cultured, and her court was more brilliant than her father's. She balanced the rival powers of France and Spain and avoided war. Trade expanded enriching the merchants and towns. Explorations and overseas trade expanded, making England a commercial and seafaring power. Parliament had increased its role in the government because of the laws to create the Reformation.

#### ▪ **The Stuart dynasty**

With the death of Elisabeth, James VI of Scotland became the first Stuart king of England. James I had been brought up by Protestant lords, he was a learned man but believed in witchcraft. He based his rule on the theory of the "divine right of kings": he believed that he was the representative of God on earth. He worked with small councils of ministers rather than with Parliament. He summoned Parliament only to ask for money, but its members refused to levy any taxes unless the money was needed for war. James surrounded himself with Scottish favourites, corruption and the great search for money and pleasure were common elements. Religion was still a critical issue. Catholics were barred from public life and Puritans disapproved both the rites and hierarchy of the Church of England. In 1620 the Pilgrim Fathers left England for America on the Mayflower and founded New Plymouth. The new world provided a convenient ground for unwanted religious and political agitators and a valuable market for English goods.

King James authorised a new translation of the Bible which would be used by the Church of England.

In 1605 some radical Catholics plotted to blow up the Houses of Parliament but the so-called "Gunpowder Plot" failed.

### The Social and Cultural Context

Under the reign of Henry VIII, the Reformation took place. The prelude to the breach with Rome the anti-clericalism of the late Middle Ages and the Humanism which encouraged confidence in the power of human reason. The Protestant Reformation in Germany had begun with the doctrines of Martin Luther and the French theologian John Calvin in Switzerland. Henry VIII did not wish to transform England into a Protestant

country. However, by 1530, his Queen Catherine of Aragon, was too old to give him a son and Henry VIII needed a male heir. Catherine was his brother's widow, so Henry asked Pope Clement VII to declare the marriage invalid, but the Pope refused. Henry's new mistress, Ann Boleyn, was pregnant. The only way he could have a legitimate male heir was to marry her. To divorce and re-marry, Henry set up the Church of England and was excommunicated by the Pope.

Henry declared himself "Supreme Head of the Church" in England, by means of the *Act of Supremacy*. The break from Rome was legitimised by Parliament which also suppressed orders of monks and friars and monasteries. This destroyed centres of education, gave the King money to defend himself from attacks from the Catholic powers and allowed him to reward his supporters. A new translation of the Bible was authorized. The new Anglican Church was born.

Ann Boleyn gave Henry another daughter, Elisabeth, and was executed. Finally, his third wife gave him a male heir, Edward.

The reading of the Bible became the central key to salvation. The *Act of Uniformity* enforced the use of the *English Book of Prayer* instead of the Latin missal. Protestantism appealed to the middle classes.

Elisabeth I's Act of Supremacy and Uniformity (1559) avoided the extremes of Catholic and Protestant.

During the Renaissance there was a well-organized social hierarchy: at the top of society was the Queen, inaccessible to the ordinary person. Next to the sovereign in the social order came the nobility. They were expected to serve the state as ambassadors, generals in the field, members of the Upper Parliament and as hosts of the Queen. They were patrons of the arts and supported poets, musicians and artists in their household. Next to the nobility in the chain of order came the knights. Below the knights were the gentlemen, men of good birth who owned some land and therefore did not need to be employed in a profession. The Tudor age saw the advance of the yeomen, farmers or merchants, successful in buying lands, branching out into industries such as coal, iron, cloth. This was a period of building. As for the poor, their conditions of life became even worse when many landowners found they could make more money from sheep farming than from growing crops and enclosed the village common land. The "Poor Laws" were passed by the Parliament in 1601. Begging was forbidden and vagabonds punished outside their own village.

Family life was different from today. The father was the head of the family and its ruler. His power and authority were recognised as part of the social order. Women had few rights. On marriage, the woman's goods and money passed into the possession of her husband. Child mortality was very high.

The Tudors inherited from the medieval worldview a system of beliefs based on a general concept of order. They pictured the universal order in three main forms: a chain, a series of corresponding planes, and a cosmic dance. The position of man was extremely interesting. Given his double nature of matter and spirit, he had the unique function of binding together all creation. The whole universe was governed by divine will; Nature was God's instrument, the social hierarchy a product of Nature.

The Queen became a symbol of stability and unity.

The Elizabethans were obsessed with the fear of chaos and the fact of mutability; to them chaos meant the cosmic anarchy before creation.

Correspondences were used in the attempt to tame a dynamic and changing world. The old order was seriously weakened by cultural influences; the sense of doubt and ambiguity, arising from the contrast of old and new ideas, was reinforced by the gathering stream of Renaissance opinion about the conduct of the individual.

The English Renaissance developed later than its European equivalents and distinguished itself as an original, typically English movement. Italian influence was immense in every sphere, from literature to fashion, but England struggled to free itself from this foreign force.

The first thing to characterize the movement was its strong Protestant basis.

Behind the new literature there was also the training in classical imitation of a number of humanist scholars and translators (Erasmus of Rotterdam). Humanism, also called “New Learning”, was established in the grammar schools and in the two universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

Humanism encouraged confidence in the power of human reason to interpret Man and Nature, in the value of literature as an instrument of reason, and in the dignity of modern English as a literary medium.