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Historical
Institute
London

German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Review of Richard Rex (ed.), *Henry VIII and Martin Luther: The Second Controversy, 1525–1527*

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German Historical Institute London Bulletin
Vol. XLV, No. 1 (May 2023), 104–8

ISSN 0269-8552

RICHARD REX (ed.), *Henry VIII and Martin Luther: The Second Controversy, 1525–1527* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2021), 322 pp. ISBN 978 1 783 27581 6. £75.00

‘Could you wish for a milder response than this, Luther?’ So ends Henry VIII’s reply to a letter from Martin Luther published in the first Latin edition of their correspondence. We can guess how the German reformer felt about this smug question by looking at his reply, which was tellingly addressed to the ‘King of England with all his blockheads’ (p. 165). This exchange in the mid 1520s has now been presented in a comprehensive edition by Reformation historian Richard Rex.

The English king and the reformer clashed in 1525, and Henry – publicly and vociferously in Europe – rejected Luther and his teachings. It was not the first time. In 1521 a first controversy between the two resulted in the book *Assertio septem sacramentorum adversus Martinum Lutherum* (‘Defence of the Seven Sacraments against Martin Luther’), and in Henry’s legendary title of *Fidei Defensor*, or Defender of the Faith. The second controversy, which Rex fundamentally reappraises in this edition, is less well known, but was no less influential in its time. It started with a letter from Luther to the English king, which was followed by a reply from Henry VIII and another riposte by the German reformer. As soon as this correspondence was published in England and the Holy Roman Empire, it attracted attention from all over Europe and many contemporary observers were prompted to publish their own comments in a variety of formats.

Rex’s book brings together some twenty sources – handwritten and printed letters, prefaces, epigraphs, and verses – that trace the second controversy from 1525 to 1527 and, in particular, the public discourse reflecting what was made of it. The publication is innovative in a number of respects. Up until now, there has been no coherent account of this brief but significant controversy in the history of the Reformation. And Rex has identified one of the two original letters which Henry VIII sent to the Holy Roman Empire in autumn 1526, replying to Luther’s letter from the year before, in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. Luther had heard a rumour that the English king was

beginning ‘to favour the gospell’ (p. 69)—that is, to follow Luther’s line—and communicated this misjudgement directly to Henry in 1525. Henry, however, could not let this rumour stand and defended himself publicly. His reply was printed in numerous personally authorized copies and sent from London to Cracow and Rome.

In the fifty-page introduction, Rex presents some new interpretations and connections. He convincingly traces the fateful rumour that sparked the second controversy back to the deposed Danish king, Christian II (pp. 13–16), from whom Luther may have heard it. The political–historical reasons why Henry VIII reacted so harshly and publicly are also made clear by reference to the situation in England in 1526 and the first anti-Lutheran measures implemented there. Rex draws close connections with the arrival of Tyndale’s translations of the New Testament in the country, and the reactions to them at Henry’s court. He places Henry’s sharp response to Luther, dated three days after the first public burning of Tyndale’s books, in the context of these defensive measures against Reformation influences from the Continent. The decisions made at court to print the letter and to translate it into English shortly thereafter were also important parts of the English government’s confessional programme, constantly pitting the *Fidei Defensor* against the reformer from Germany.

According to Rex’s reconstruction, Henry VIII sent his Latin reply in duplicate to Albrecht of Brandenburg, the archbishop of Mainz, and Duke George of Saxony, both fierce opponents of Luther in the Holy Roman Empire. Having found one of these letters in Cambridge (p. 24), Rex bases this edition on it as ‘the best attestation of the original text’ (p. 26). This letter was promptly circulated by the Saxon duke and was soon printed in Dresden. This Dresden edition, in turn, was the text on which many other versions (p. 25) that appeared in Europe during the same year were based.

The English king’s new argument with Luther found wide resonance in Catholic Europe. In Rome, cardinals were enthusiastic and editors from Flanders to Rome and Cracow reissued Henry’s letter, with many editions receiving new prefaces commenting on the second controversy. A version printed in Cologne and the Latin edition in England were provided with marginalia and comments by Johannes Cochlaeus, which Rex has carefully included in the current edition.

In his introduction he analyses the textual relationships between the numerous editions identified (sixteen in all, from Cologne to Cracow) and provides a list of early editions (pp. 55–66).

But Henry did not receive only recognition and praise. The Dresden edition also reached Luther's desk and did not remain unanswered. With 'his usual impetuous energy' (p. 32) and in an 'offensive tone' (p. 33) that caused much discussion, he wrote a long reply complaining about the 'pride of Satan' he found in it. Luther was not so much annoyed by the answer itself, but by the title under which his letter appeared in the Dresden edition: 'palinodia', that is, a recantation. In doing so, Luther got himself further into difficulties, as the recantation in the Latin title grammatically referred to the retraction of the injury to the king in the first controversy, but not to a recantation of Luther's teachings.

Luther's reaction, however, could be further exploited by the Catholic side. It also shows that the second controversy cannot be separated from the first. Many of the contentious points were revisited, but not so much substantively as at the level of rhetoric and polemic. As in the first controversy in 1521, Luther's strategy of attacking the king included casting doubt on the latter's authorship. In his first letter Luther wanted to win Henry over to his confessional views, but in the second one he claimed that the king lacked the intelligence to join the correct side in the religious debate. Rex takes this as an opportunity – as in earlier publications from the 1990s¹ – to comment again on the authorship of the *Assertio*. He confirms that Henry VIII himself was 'chiefly responsible' (p. 9) for the book, but suggests that he had received advice from university theologians convened for the purpose. However, he continues to reject the notion that court theologians such as Thomas More or John Fisher were involved, thus arguing against Pierre Fraenkel's introduction to the 1992 Corpus Catholicorum edition of the *Assertio* (pp. 7–12),² which sought to highlight their involvement. Ultimately, the question of authorship remains a matter of achieving a balance between strong arguments on both sides, both of which should be given due consideration.

¹ See Richard Rex, *The Theology of John Fisher* (Cambridge, 1991).

² Pierre Fraenkel (ed.), *Heinrich VIII: Assertio septem sacramentorum adversus Martinum Lutherum* (Münster, 1992).

Luther's reply to Henry added a new layer to the controversy, and again books appeared that now brought together all three letters and, where necessary, additional commentary on them. For Catholic editors, Luther's inconsistency was demonstrated by his insults towards and contradictory assumptions about a king whom he had previously 'womanishly flattered' (p. 167 n. 6), but shortly thereafter clearly and unquestionably condemned. The aftermath of the Peasants' War of 1525 provided additional arguments against Luther. Anti-Henrician, pro-Lutheran editions, on the other hand, cannot be found—the strategy of English Catholic publications was too effective, and Luther's responses were too stubborn to generate much support.

But despite the clearly anti-Lutheran stance of the English court, Rex considers the second controversy a 'little epoch in the English Reformation' (p. 39). For Henry's decision to have the letter printed in the vernacular as well as in Latin, and to communicate his and Luther's positions to his subjects in a preface that was also a panegyric, was a step towards authorizing a translation of the Bible. Tyndale and Luther did not yet suggest this, but Rex sees the fact that Henry wanted the theological discussion—peppered with biblical passages—to be disseminated in English as a precursor to a dissemination of scripture controlled by the king (pp. 38–9). He points out that not only ruptures but also lines of continuity can be found between the 1520s and later iterations of Henry VIII.

This exemplary edition will also be useful for scholars far beyond historians of the Reformation and those interested in English–German relations. In particular, the prefaces by other authors included here provide examples of a European publication campaign initiated and supported by the English government and Henry VIII. The commentaries in prefaces, marginalia, and epigraphs from across Europe, and the short-lived nature of the debate, point to important publication channels that were well used in the sixteenth century, especially by princes. These texts may also be of interest to linguists and literary historians exploring contemporary translation practices. In particular, friends of humanist rhetoric will take pleasure from the writings of Luther and Henry, as their exchange of blows—complete with biting and sarcastic comments in the printed versions—offers ample material for an examination of the rhetoric of defamation and the prominence

of insult and sarcasm in Renaissance controversies. As these writings appeared all over Europe, Rex's book makes a useful contribution to a European history of the Reformation. Scholars of English-German relations will also find its handling of the strong link between the English Crown and the imperial city of Cologne to be of great interest. Rex, for example, covers councillor Hermann von Rinck's support and patronage of English interests in this important communication hub in the Holy Roman Empire.

The book leaves only a few minor things to be desired. In the select bibliography one could have hoped for a wider range of literature, given the editor's wealth of knowledge. German titles do not appear here, with the exception of the aforementioned Pierre Fraenkel and the popularizing works by Sabine Appel, although material is available on English-Lutheran relations and on Robert Barnes, mentioned frequently by Rex. In the volume itself, the references to the provenances of the documents are not found directly with the individual source texts, but are bundled together in a separate section of the book. Here, further critical information, clearly presented, would have been desirable. In addition, the marginalia included are translated in different places—some in the footnotes, but others in their own separate section (pp. 136–41). This takes some getting used to.

With his book, Richard Rex demonstrates his vast knowledge of English discussions of Luther. Without this, such a special and useful publication would not have been possible. He is to be thanked for making his knowledge and insights available in this close look at the sources.

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