

# ELIZABETH BARTON AND TUDOR CENSORSHIP

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THE study of censorship and control of the press in Tudor England casts much light on the whole problem of official control of popular thought and opinion. In the affair of "the Nun's book" in 1533 we can see, for example, what may be the first case of really successful suppression of books and ideas in England. The steps taken by Thomas Cromwell and Thomas Cranmer against an attack on the actions of Henry VIII by Elizabeth Barton and a group of conservative clergy provide us with both a classic example of how it could be done, and also the chance to see how authority rose to the challenge of the printing press. The case is of much more than bibliographical or even narrowly historical interest. It is certain enough that the great movements of Renaissance and Reformation resulted in large part from the free flow of ideas through the early press, and it is just as certain that the specifically English form of both resulted in large part from the careful channelling of that flow by the Henrician government and its successors.

All censorship can be said to be directed to the suppression of religious and political heterodoxy. Tudor censorship, accordingly, was at first based on early legislation commanding the surrender of Wycliffite tracts and Bibles.<sup>1</sup> There seems to have been no realization at first of the great difference made by the invention of printing, which had made the matter of control more urgent by making books cheaper and more numerous, but had made it easier by its nature as a business. The printer, unlike the scrivener, needed a shop, equipment, employees, and supplies, all things that made him liable to personal and political pressures. The first English legislation to deal specifically with printing was the Act of 1484, which encouraged foreign workmen and allowed easy importation of books.<sup>2</sup> Although

<sup>1</sup> A. W. Reed, "The Regulation of the Book Trade Before the Proclamation of 1538", *Trans. Bibliographical Soc.*, xv (1917-19), 158-9.

<sup>2</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, 1 Richard III, c. ix.

there was no official censorship, the clergy no doubt kept an eye on what was being printed ; they were, after all, the best customers the printers had, and the printers had made themselves liable to ecclesiastical authority by clustering about St. Paul's Cathedral for the sake of business. In 1520 the Papal Bull against Martin Luther and his writings led to the first action against free circulation of books.<sup>1</sup> By 1524 the exhibition of copy to the episcopal authorities was necessary before publication<sup>2</sup> and for some years afterwards the authorities tried with little success to control publication by making the printers exhibit copy and by condemning books by proclamation, symbolic burning of copies, and public sermons of condemnation. From 1528 their failure became more evident as increasing numbers of books from William Tyndale and the Protestant exiles found their way into England along the well-established trade route between Amsterdam and London.

By 1530 the situation was coming to a head. Cardinal Wolsey had fallen ; Cromwell was rising ; Thomas More had begun his pamphleteering match with Tyndale ; new legislation had come to forbid the setting up of new presses by aliens<sup>3</sup> ; the proclamation of 22 June 1530 had condemned, without any effect that can be seen, a string of books " printed beyonde the see " <sup>4</sup>; and the divorce question was producing an increasing flow of radical Protestant books from abroad, matched by a flow of conservative Catholic books at home. Clearly something had to be done to silence criticism and join Englishmen

<sup>1</sup> H. S. Bennett, *English Books and Readers, 1475 to 1557* (Cambridge, 1952), p. 33. The episcopal " licence " quoted by Reed (pp. 159-60) from *S.T.C.* 22557 in 1514 seems more a testimonial for the book than a permit to print.

<sup>2</sup> Reed, pp. 162 ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, 21 Henry VIII, c. xvi.

<sup>4</sup> *S.T.C.* 7775 ; Robert Steele, *Tudor and Stuart Proclamations*, vol. i (Oxford, 1910), no. 122. Certain books had also been prohibited in the previous year (*ibid.* no. 114). For the Antwerp printers see Robert Steele, " Hans Luft of Marburg. A Contribution to the Study of William Tyndale ", *The Library*, 3rd ser., ii (1911), 113-31 ; " Notes on English Books Printed Abroad, 1525-1548 ", *Trans. Bibl. Soc.*, xi (1909-11), 189-237 ; M. E. Kronenberg, " Notes on English Printing in the Low Countries (1491-1540) ", *The Library*, 4th ser., ix (1926-29), 139-63 ; and " Forged Addresses in Low Country Books in the Period of the Reformation ", *ibid.* 5th ser., ii (1947-48), 81-94.

against a common enemy. And so, in 1533 it became obvious that there had been a conspiracy against the king at home since about the time Tyndale had left for the Continent; and that exposure of the plot of the "Nun of Kent", Elizabeth Barton, and her accomplices would be likely to gain popular support for the king, would enable the government to strike hard at the more conservative Catholics, and would help it to get a firm grip on the pulpit and the press.

Cromwell was certainly the man who established control of the press for Henry VIII, and the case of Elizabeth Barton seems to have shown him how to do it. When he began there were no suitable laws; the condemnation of the plotters and the order for surrender of all copies of their writings had to be effected by an Act of Attainder,<sup>1</sup> without a trial and without allowing the plotters any chance to defend themselves. But as they went to Tyburn in April 1534 Parliament was repealing the liberal Act of 1484, on the grounds that England now had books and printers enough of her own, and was making it high treason to publish books against the marriage to Anne Boleyn. After Elizabeth Barton the government was ready and able legally to deny the use of the press to its critics and enemies and to reserve it for Cromwell's humanist and anti-papal publicists.<sup>2</sup>

Elizabeth Barton herself is a tragic figure. She was a servant in the house of Archbishop Warham's Steward at Aldington in Kent until about Easter 1525 when, having become seriously ill, she uttered prophecies or what seemed to be prophecies during a seizure. An episcopal commission headed by Dr. Edward Bocking cleared her of any suspicion of diabolical possession, and she was publicly and, it was claimed, miraculously cured of her illness that autumn before thousands of witnesses at the chapel of Our Lady of Courtopstrete, following a promise she said had been made to her in a vision. She then entered

<sup>1</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, 25 Henry VIII, c. xii. "An Acte concernyng the Attaynder of Elizabeth Barton & others".

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 25 Henry VIII, c. xv. "An Acte for prynters & bynders of bokes", and c. xxii, v. Offences such as those of Elizabeth Barton and her adherents were made treasonable by 26 Henry VIII, c. xiii, which expressly prohibited calling the king an infidel or heretic.

the convent of St. Sepulchre's in Canterbury, taking Bocking as her "ghostly father"; and a book about her cure, containing many of her revelations and the words spoken by a mysterious voice at the cure, was printed and circulated while she lived quietly as a nun. Her second rise to fame and her hard fall resulted from her advisor's attempt to use her prophecies and attacks on the religious reformers for an open attack on the king's plan to divorce his queen and marry Anne Boleyn. Under Bocking's guidance she spoke with growing confidence from 1528 on, bearding the king himself in his palace to tell him to mend his ways and threatening the Pope with divine retribution should he grant the divorce.<sup>1</sup> Clearly she could have become very dangerous if her words caught the imagination of the people; the spread of her fame had to be halted and she and her friends discredited.

In July 1533 the king personally ordered Cromwell and Cranmer to take action.<sup>2</sup> While the new archbishop was gently questioning her at Otford,<sup>3</sup> Cromwell was using his connections in the City to stop the publication of a work he called "the Nun's book", which had been printed for Bocking by John Skot, who confessed to having 200 copies and said that Bocking had 500.<sup>4</sup> A remembrance of Cromwell's calls for

<sup>1</sup> Most historians of the Reformation give some account of Elizabeth Barton, but from the very beginning there have been wide differences in interpretation of the records. Sir Sidney Lee's article in *D.N.B.* is certainly, as Dom David Knowles has written in *The Religious Orders in England*, iii (Cambridge, 1959), 182, "violently biased and full of historical errors", but the very sympathetic account in L. E. Whatmore, "The Sermon Against the Holy Maid of Kent", *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, lviii (1943), 463-75, seems just as wrong in its assumption of the innocence of the nun and her closest advisors. The most balanced and reliable interpretation still seems to be A. D. Cheney's "The Holy Maid of Kent", *Trans. Royal Hist. Soc.*, n.s., xviii (1904), 107-29. The most interesting of the various contemporary accounts is found in a personal letter from Cranmer to Archdeacon Hawkyns (see Thomas Cranmer, *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters*, ed. J. E. Cox (Cambridge, 1846), pp. 272-4).

<sup>2</sup> *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, ed. J. S. Brewer and J. Gairdner, vol. vi (London, 1882), document 887.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* doc. 869, from Cranmer to Cromwell; doc. 967, from Richard Gwent to Cromwell, saying that "my Lord doth yet but dally with her, as he did believe her every word, and as soon as he hath all he can get of her he shall send her to you".

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* doc. 1194.

the questioning of various monks of Canterbury ; for consultation with the king about Edward Thwaites, an implicated layman who was possibly the author of the book about the cure ; for consideration of some unspecified advice from " Mr. Solicitor " about the book ; for sending the book to certain bishops ; and for asking the king whether everyone who knew about the book should be sent for and questioned.<sup>1</sup>

By the middle of November the nun was said to have confessed all<sup>2</sup>; and the ambassador of the Emperor Charles V reported that there had been many arrests. The king, he said, had been apparently advised against trial by jury. He wanted the plotters condemned as traitors and heretics, it was said, and only Parliament could be trusted to condemn them, especially since the basis of the treason charge was thought to be the secrecy with which the attacks had been made, although it was well known that she had made her charges directly to the king a year earlier.<sup>3</sup> On 23 November a public humiliation of all the plotters was staged on a scaffold at St. Paul's Cathedral. They were forced to confess their crimes publicly and to listen to an abusive address by John Capon or Salcote, the Abbot of Hyde and Bishop-elect of Bangor, who read out her revelations from a printed book and a manuscript in Bocking's handwriting.<sup>4</sup> The manuscript was, I believe, the original copy for " the Nun's book " of Cromwell's remembrance, 700 copies of which have disappeared ; the printed book was the account of the cure, which has also disappeared, although William Lambarde made notes from a copy almost forty years after the condemnation.

Shortly afterwards Cromwell made a note for a Bill of Attainder for the execution of Elizabeth Barton, Edward Bocking, John Dering, Richard Master, Henry Gold, Hugh Rich, and Richard Risby for treason ; and John Fisher, John Adeson, Thomas Abel, Thomas Gold, Thomas Lawrence, and Edward

<sup>1</sup> *Letters and Papers*, vol. vi, doc. 1381.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* doc. 1433.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* doc. 1419 of 12 November and document 1445 of 20 November.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* doc. 1460. The text of the sermon with introduction and notes is given by Whatmore.

Thwaites to lose their goods for misprision.<sup>1</sup> Another note reminded him about the "great book" in Bocking's handwriting, the form for Elizabeth Barton's confession, and the text of the sermon preached by Capon at St. Paul's.<sup>2</sup> It was to be preached again at Canterbury by Nicholas Heath,<sup>3</sup> and Cromwell was obviously holding on to the props for the new staging. In February the Bill was brought in; in March it received Royal Assent; and on 20 April the nun and five of the clerics were drawn from the Tower to Tyburn and there hanged.<sup>4</sup>

The writings of the group, which must certainly have contained an important statement of conservative religious and political thought at a crucial point in English intellectual life, seem to have disappeared. I know of no books extant now that could be either "the Nun's book" or the account of the miraculous cure. And there were other books as well. Strype noted that "many books were written and printed of her revelations"<sup>5</sup>; the Act of Attainder said that the plotters had "made wryte and caused to be wrytyn sondry bokes, bothe greate and small, both prynted and wrytyn, concernyng the particularities of the seid false and feyned hypocrisy and revelacions of the seid Elizabeth"; the *Confutation of Unwritten Verities* mentioned "books of heresy and treason".<sup>6</sup> At least two printed books were involved,

<sup>1</sup> *Letters and Papers*, vol. vii (London, 1883), doc. 70. Both Fisher and More were to be included in the Attainder, but More was successful in proving that he was not an adherent of "the lewde Nonne of Caunterburye"; see *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, ed. Elizabeth Frances Rogers (Princeton, 1947), letters no. 192 (to Elizabeth Barton) and 195 and 197 (to Cromwell). Fisher's unsuccessful appeals can be found in *Letters and Papers*, vol. vii, docs. 239 and 240, while Cromwell's abusive letter to him about his part in the nun's affair (doc. 238) is printed in full by Thomas Wright, *Three Chapters of Letters Relating to the Suppression of Monasteries* (London, 1843), letter XI, pp. 27-39.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters and Papers*, vol. vii, doc. 72.

<sup>3</sup> Whatmore, p. 464. Heath is named as the Canterbury preacher in *A Confutation of Unwritten Verities*, attributed to Cranmer. See Cranmer, p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> Cheney, p. 114. Richard Master is said by early writers to have been hanged with the others, but he was in fact given a free pardon and restored as rector of Aldington, a place he kept until his death in 1558. Aldington was the benefice that Warham had given to Erasmus, who received a pension from it until his death. See P. S. Allen, *Opus Epistolarum Erasmi*, xi (Oxford, 1947), 71.

<sup>5</sup> John Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials*, I, i (Oxford, 1822), 278.

<sup>6</sup> Cranmer, p. 66.

then, and possibly several ; all have disappeared, in contrast to the condemned books of Tyndale and his circle, virtually all of which have survived official condemnation.<sup>1</sup>

It is easy enough to see how Cromwell was able to work so much more effectively than his predecessors. Where they had had to cope with books coming along established routes from Antwerp under false imprints of "Hans Luft" or "Adam Anonimus", he had only to worry in this case about a small printing community, easily brought under control from St. Paul's. Furthermore, most of the printers seem to have been, like so many of the City merchants, still affected by Lollardy and far more inclined to the Protestant than the conservative side, especially where the regular clergy were concerned, as in the case of "the Nun's book". Cromwell had informants and friends in the City, too, notably his publishing agent William Marshall in Wood Street, who was probably able to offer official patronage to the printers.<sup>2</sup> Control of the printing trade was certainly firm if Cromwell succeeded, as he seems to have done, in finding out what so small a printer as Skot was about, in getting a confession out of him, and halting the publication of 700 copies of a book, most of which had already been delivered.

The first book connected with the Nun of Kent was the description of her cure, which must have been published fairly soon after the actual event, as Cranmer later wrote that there had been "a book written of all the whole story thereof, and put into print, which ever since that time hath been commonly sold and gone abroad amongst all people".<sup>3</sup> Usually it has been attributed by historians to Edward Thwaites. He is not, however, named as the author in either the Attainder or the sermon at the humiliation, in both of which he is mentioned. The copy examined some years afterwards by William Lambarde was anonymous, but Lambarde did suggest Thwaites as the author in his description of the book :

For not long since, it chaunced mee to see a little Pamphlet, conteining foure & twenty leaues, penned by *Edward Thwaytes*, or I wote not by what doltish

<sup>1</sup> See Bennett, p. 34 for the failure of the authorities to halt the spread of Lutheran pamphlets and the Tyndale New Testament.

<sup>2</sup> *D.N.B.*

<sup>3</sup> Cranmer, p. 273.

dreamer, prynted by *Robert Redman*, Intituled *A maruelous worke of late done at Court of Streete in Kent*, and published (as it pretendeth) to the deuout people of that time for their spirituall consolation . . .<sup>1</sup>

Lombarde gave an abstract of the pamphlet, which contained a brief life of Elizabeth Barton, her disease and visitations. The commission from Warham is described, with the information that the commissioners "opposed her of the chiefe pointes of the Popish beliefe, and finding her sounde therein, not onely waded no further in the discouerie of the fraude, but gaue fauourable countenance".<sup>2</sup> And so for some time the chapel was a place of pilgrimage,<sup>3</sup> and Elizabeth Barton lived quietly at St. Sepulchre's in Canterbury until the divorce led her to political prophecy, in which she was surprisingly successful, so much so that her revelations to Wolsey and Warham were actually said to have held up the divorce.<sup>4</sup>

The Redman pamphlet was merely an affirmation of traditional Catholic doctrine, written and published long before the divorce and so probably obnoxious only to the reformers. Yet it was certainly the book held by Capon at the humiliation, at which it was cited as a book "*of the wonderful work done at Our Lady at Court-of-Street.*"<sup>5</sup> In his sermon Capon gave an example of something not mentioned by Lambarde, the rhyming prophesies and utterances so characteristic of such movements.

If thou the Sunday see not God in the face ;  
If thou die that week suddenly without confession,  
Thou standest, man, in the way of damnation.<sup>6</sup>

The rhymes had apparently been part of her original utterances, though whether inspired by Bocking or from her earlier seizures is uncertain. They were included in a transcript sent by Warham to the king, and given by him to Thomas More for consideration. More claimed later that he had "founde nothinge in these wordes that I coulde eny thinge regarde or esteme, ff[or] sauinge

<sup>1</sup> S.T.C. 15176 ; William Lambarde, *A Perambulation of Kent*, 2nd edn. (London, 1596), N3<sup>v</sup>. Sir Sidney Lee cites the book in *D.N.B.* as "A miraculous work of late done at Court-of-Strete in Kent, published to the deuoute people of this tyme for their spiritual consolation, by Edward Thwaytes, Gent. 1527", but gives no source for his information.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. N5<sup>r-v</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Cheney, p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> Cranmer, p. 273 ; Whatmore, p. 467.

<sup>5</sup> Whatmore, p. 465.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 472.

that some parte fell in rime, and that, God wotte, full rude."<sup>1</sup> In 1530 Tyndale, attacking More as a supporter of the nun, ridiculed the "hie lerninge which as a goodly poetisse, she vttered in rimes", claiming that in Scripture she would be found "clene with out ryme or reason."<sup>2</sup> Whether the rhymes all were, as Capon had claimed, "neither true nor catholic" is uncertain, but it is clear from his sample that they were "full rude".

This booklet was certainly not "the Nun's book" of Cromwell's remembrance, although it came no doubt under the general condemnation of the group's writings in the Attainder. It was printed (though possibly not for the first time) by Robert Redman, while "the Nun's book" was printed by John Skot<sup>3</sup>; it was an early work that had even reached Tyndale in Antwerp by 1530, while the book seized by Cromwell in the summer of 1533 was apparently about to be issued for the first time; it was a pamphlet of only forty-eight pages, while "the Nun's book" is always mentioned as a "great book."<sup>4</sup>

It is impossible to say whether Redman's printing was the first edition or a reprint. Between 1523 and his death in 1540 he printed or published more than 150 books,<sup>5</sup> most of which were law books or reprints rather than original works; indeed, early in his career he received much abuse from Richard Pynson for printing his copies. It is interesting to note, however, that in 1533 he was bound over not to sell books privileged by the king<sup>6</sup>; but early in 1534 he printed an English translation of Erasmus's *Symbolum sive Catechismus* for William Marshall,

<sup>1</sup> *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, letter no. 197.

<sup>2</sup> S.T.C. 24437; William Tyndale, *An answer vnto Sir Thomas Mores dialogue* [Antwerp, 1530?], H1<sup>r</sup>. For a subsidiary meaning of *poeta* as a "con-triver" see Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1933).

<sup>3</sup> See p. 94, n. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Whatmore, *passim*. Cranmer noted (p. 273) that her visions "were so many, that her ghostly father could scantly write them in three or four quires of paper."

<sup>5</sup> P. G. Morrison, *Index of Printers, Publishers and Booksellers in A. W. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave, A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland and Ireland and of English Books Printed Abroad, 1475-1640* (Charlottesville, 1961), pp. 61-62.

<sup>6</sup> E. G. Duff, *A Century of the English Book Trade* (London, 1905), p. 132.

Cromwell's agent.<sup>1</sup> There is no mention of him in the papers about the nun's affair, and Marshall's patronage shows that he got into no great trouble about the book, which he may never have reprinted after 1527 or 1528.

The book Cromwell moved against with such speed, then, must have been a book of revelations of Elizabeth Barton after she had entered the divorce controversy. It must have been considered highly inflammatory and most dangerous to the government at the time ; so dangerous, in fact, that all the 700 copies mentioned in Skot's confession seem to have been destroyed at once. There is a note among Cromwell's remembrances to have the book sent to certain bishops,<sup>2</sup> presumably for an opinion on whether or not it was heretical, and it seems not unlikely that printed copies might have been used. But the book displayed and quoted from at St. Paul's was a manuscript in Bocking's hand.<sup>3</sup>

There was much in the book. One revelation was that Wolsey had died fifteen years before he should have, but that his particular judgement was being held for the proper time. Another apparently suggested that a dead man had been, through her intercession, delivered from a place of no salvation, presumably Hell, into Purgatory. Great companies of angels, martyrs, confessors, and virgins had come to pay homage to her ; and the Devil himself came, " like a jolly gallant ", to woo her to be his wife. The latter part of the book contained a transcript of a letter written in Heaven by Mary Magdalen in the nun's name, preserved as a relic at Canterbury by Bocking, a splendid piece of work with golden lettering, of which Capon declared that " by much inquisition Mary Magdalene is found out, and is turned into a monk of St. Augustine's in Canterbury, named Hawkhurst ! " And furthermore, as Capon concluded, with logic that shows at least how he became a bishop despite a papal veto, it contained reproach against the king, " a due and sure

<sup>1</sup> *Letters and Papers*, vol. vi, docs. 422 and 423 ; S.T.C. 10504 and 10504<sup>a</sup>. See also C. C. Butterworth, *The English Primers (1529-1545)* (Philadelphia, 1953), pp. 79-103, for Redman as a printer of reformed liturgies.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters and Papers*, vol. vi, doc. 1381.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 96, n. 2, and Whatmore, p. 472.

proof that her said feigned revelations be false and untrue", for "it is evident to all the world that there be no such ill qualities in our most noble sovereign!"<sup>1</sup>

There is also much quotation from the "great book" in the *Attainder*, where it is claimed that Bocking, Master, and Dering arranged the miracles and prophecies and wrote and published books about them

to thonely intente to bryng the seid Elizabeth in the fame and credyte of the people of this Realme, wherby the people shulde the more be apte and disposed by her fals cloked hypocrysy and sanctitie to commytte the crymes of blasphemye and hydolatrie ayenst God, and also the soner induced by the fals revelacions of the seid Elizabeth to murmur gruge and be of evyll opynyon ayenst the majeste of our seid Sovereigne Lorde to the greate perell and daunger of hys most ryall person: And one Edwarde Thwaites gentilman translated and wrott dyverse quayres and shetis of paper concernyng the seid false feyned revelacions and myracles of the seid Elizabeth: And also one Thomas Laurence of Canturbury being regester to the Archidecon of Canturbury, at the instance and desyre of the seid Edwarde Bockyng wrott a greate boke of the seid falce and feyned myracles and revelacions of the seid Elizabeth in a fayre hande redy to be a cotype to the prynter when the seid boke shulde be put to stampe.

The visit of the Devil and the letter from Mary Magdalen are mentioned, and also a case of a direct sign of divine displeasure with the king.

There was also wrytyn and conteyned amonges the seid false and feyned myracles and revelacions, that when the Kynges Highnes was at Caleis in the entreview betwene hys Majestie and the Frenche Kyng and heryng masse in the Churche of our Lady at Caleis, that God was so displeased with the Kynges Highnes that hys grace sawe not that tyme at the masse the blessed Sacrament in forme of breade, for it was takyn away from the Prest [and] (being at masse) by an angell, and mynystred to the seid Elizabeth then being there present and invysible, and sodenly conveyed and rapte thens ageyn by the power of God in to the seid Nonnerie where she is professed; with many other false fables and tales devysed conspired and defended by the seid Elizabeth, Edwarde Bockyng and John Deryng wrytyn as myracles in the seid bokes. . . .

That the writings of the group contained direct references to Anne Boleyn is shown in the statement that "suche termes and sentences of reproche and slaunder ageynst the Kynges Highnes and the Quene" as had been written in the books were "to shameful to be wrytyn ayenst the most vyle and ungracious persones lyvyng."

<sup>1</sup> Whatmore, pp. 470-2.

The most properly treasonable of her statements was certainly the one that the Attainder charged came originally from Bocking, that the king should be no longer king a month after marrying Anne. Even more dangerous, and more treasonable, was the interpretation made when the king did in fact maintain his throne, which was that he had not been king in the eyes of God a day or an hour after the marriage, and that he should die "a villaynes dethe". Another revelation that could easily be seen as incitement to rebellion was

that there was a roote with three branches and tyll they were plucked upp it shuld never be merye in Englund, interpretyng the roote to be the late Lorde Cardynall, and the first branche to be the Kynge our Soveraigne Lorde, the seconde, the Duke of Norfolke and the thirde [to be] the Duke of Suffolke; which falce feyned revelacions, by the myschevous and malicious counsayle and conspiracye of the seid Edward Bocking with the seid Elizabeth, were wrytyn and expressed in the seid bokes and volumes conteynyng the false and feyned revelacions and myracles. . . .

So it was claimed that her reputation had been built up to bring her into "a greate brute and fame of the people in sondre parties of this Realme", and that the revelations on the divorce question had been made by Bocking and a "secrete conspiracy of dyverse persones unknowen" for the sake of putting the king "in a murmur and evyll opynyon of hys people". They were to be used, it was claimed, in sermons to be preached throughout England when a signal was given by the nun, "to put our seid Soveraigne Lorde not only in the perell of hys lyff but also in the jeopardie of losse and depryvacion of his crowne and dignytie royall".

It is plain, then, that "the Nun's book" and the earlier pamphlet could have been a threat to the safety of the realm. The charges were of a kind that would stick in the popular mind; they were backed by signs and wonders as well as by the nun's reputation for holiness; some of what she had had to say was cast in easily-recalled doggerel rhyme; and some, like the root with three branches, was in the popular allegorical manner that had marked the catchphrases a century and more earlier of the "Great Society" of the 1381 Peasants' Rising. Used as a sourcebook for a concerted preaching campaign it might have touched the deep current of conservatism in the commons,

brought back memories of the great peasant uprising, and touched off something more dangerous by far than the later Pilgrimage of Grace. It seems significant that all the copies of Skot's printing immediately disappeared. Public statements do not even mention that "the Nun's book" had been printed; Capon's sermon made much of the original in Bocking's handwriting, and the Attainder cited the fair copy made for a future printing by Thomas Lawrence, but only Cromwell's remembrance shows that the book was printed.

Skot was no doubt easily taken care of by Cromwell. He was a small printer, usually a jobber for larger printers such as Wynkyn de Worde<sup>1</sup>; indeed, fewer than twenty extant books are known to contain his imprint, and none of these can be dated in the years 1531 to 1536.<sup>2</sup> That his professional name was not good is shown by at least one contemporary reference<sup>3</sup>; and the fact that his confession was one of the first documents in the case, and a starting point for further inquiries, could be taken to suggest that he came forward with information. The phrasing of Cromwell's remembrance seems to indicate that Skot printed "the Nun's book" merely as jobbing work for Bocking. He is never mentioned again in the proceedings, and there is nothing to show that he was punished in any way; indeed, it is likely that he shared with more established men in the printing of reformation literature after the break with Rome.<sup>4</sup>

More books can be connected with the attainted group, though only one of them definitely contained revelations of the nun. After the interrogations had begun, a book called *De Duplice Spiritu* was compiled by John Dering, with answers to the arguments Cranmer had put forward in his questioning of Henry Gold and a defence of the nun's revelations. Dering's own abstract of the book was sent to Cromwell, but he claimed that he had burnt the original. Cranmer, who had heard from an informant that Gold had the full text, suggested to Cromwell

<sup>1</sup> Duff, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> Morrison, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by H. R. Plomer in *A Short History of English Printing* (London, 1900), p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> E. J. Devereux, "Some Lost English Translations of Erasmus", *The Library*, 5th ser., xvii (1962), 258.

“ that some good and politic mean be made for the trial and search of the verity of the premises betimes, without tract or delay”.<sup>1</sup> Cromwell’s answer is not preserved, as far as I know, but it is more than likely that the book was found and suppressed before it could have been printed.

Thomas Bedyll, who was sent by Cromwell to seize John Fisher’s writings on the divorce question, discovered more books at Sion, where the Father Confessor admitted to having Fisher’s treatise against the divorce, and also “ Abels booke, and one other booke ” thought to be by the Imperial Ambassador Eustace Chapuys.<sup>2</sup> Thomas Abel’s book was *Invicta Veritas*, which had been printed with a false imprint at Antwerp in May 1532. It was a detailed answer to the royalist argument that the Pope could not give dispensation allowing a man to marry his brother’s widow ; it contained no mention whatever of Elizabeth Barton or her revelations, but depended entirely on citation and argument for its case.<sup>3</sup> Fisher’s book was *De causa matrimonii serenissimae Regis Angliae liber*, another treatment of the divorce question, printed at Alcala in 1530. The book attributed to Chapuys could have contained something of the nun’s claims if it was, as seems most probable, one of his reports to Charles V.<sup>4</sup>

The books of Fisher and Abel are now extremely rare. The inclusion of their authors in the Attainder, and the implied condemnation of the books by proclamation, show that the government’s action was not intended merely to get rid of a bothersome prophetess, but was primarily meant to give authority the means to suppress controversy, particularly about the divorce and the great political and religious upheaval that came with it.

Cromwell’s success in suppressing the literature of the Nun of Kent group was based partly on the efficiency of his informants and associates. One feels, reading through the papers of the

<sup>1</sup> Cranmer, p. 277.

<sup>2</sup> Wright, letter XVI, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> *S.T.C.* 61 ; Thomas Abell, *Invicta Veritas* (Lunenburg [i.e. Antwerp], May 1532). The editors of the revised *S.T.C.* have identified the printer as Martin de Keyser. A Latin answer to “ Abel’s book ” is printed in Strype, I, ii, doc. XXXIX.

<sup>4</sup> Reports from Chapuys make up one of the fullest contemporary accounts of the nun’s affair and its effects on policy. They are summarized in the *Letters and Papers*.

affair, that there was no chance of their eluding him ; Skot's confession and the seizure of " the Nun's book " so soon after the king's original order is only one of the proofs of how well Cromwell worked. But it was also based on a shrewd idea of human nature that showed him how to counter whatever popular appeal Elizabeth Barton and her adherents might have had <sup>1</sup> by making the workings of the plot public, and bringing her as much as possible into disrepute. She was to be shown as being inspired not by God but by the crafty monks, and led on to treason through the easily-scorned weaknesses of female vanity, susceptibility to suggestion, and a lecherous nature. At St. Paul's, for example, it was claimed that Bocking had

daily rehearsed matter enough unto her, out of St. Bridget's and St. Catherine of Senys [Siena's] revelations, to make up her fantasies and counterfeit visions, and moved her very often and busily to make petition to God to have revelations in manifold matter. And when she ceased any while of shewing new revelations unto him, he was wont to say unto her : ' How do you live now ? Virtuously ? Meseemeth God hath withdrawn His grace from you, that ye have no revelations this season.' Which words caused her to feign many more revelations than she else would.

Hypocrisy was another thing that could diminish any popular regard, so Capon told his audience at St. Paul's that the nun had lived well while making her followers do penance : " she (being herself fat and ruddy) caused some to fast so much that the sharpness of their bones had almost worn through their skin ". The suggestion of sexual immorality was made as often as possible. Capon hinted that Elizabeth Barton had spent the night before her entry into St. Sepulchre's with Bocking, and commented on the admitted fact that she had often left her cell late at night and that " she went not about the saying of her Pater Noster ! " <sup>2</sup> The Attainder also included the statement that

<sup>1</sup> How great her influence actually was is uncertain. Cheney calls the chapel at Courtopstrete " a noted place of pilgrimage " and quotes J. A. Froude's claim that her cell at Canterbury was " the Delphic shrine of the Catholic oracle " (pp. 110-11) ; but Cranmer reported to Henry VIII that only Bocking's own novices had been affected at Christ Church, Canterbury (Cranmer, p. 271), while Roland Lee and Thomas Bedyll assured Cromwell that only five or six young monks had even read part of Bocking's book (Wright, letter IX, p. 25).

<sup>2</sup> Whatmore, pp. 469-71. The Prior of Christ Church told Cromwell that it was stated in one " quayer " of Bocking's book that " she was meny tymes

Bocking had often visited her at St. Sepulchre's, "not without probable vehement and vyolent suspicion of incontynencye". Neither gave any proof, but the crime was treason rather than incontynency, and the unsupported accusation was quite enough to diminish any public reputation for sanctity.

Finally, under the Attainder proclamations were sent out under the Great Seal to all cities and towns in the realm to spread the word of the nun's downfall, so the people might "take an example of drede to offende in lyke cases here after". At the end of the proclamation there was an order that anyone having "any bokes scrolles or wrytynges conteynyng any the false feyned revelacions and dissymuled myracles" should hand them in within forty days or suffer imprisonment and a fine. Though this method was no more than the one that had failed before against the Lollard pamphleteers, it appears to have been amply successful, mainly as a result of Cromwell's skill. That he himself saw it as inefficient is shown in the legislation that appeared in the same year giving the government some consistent legal control over publication, and later in the perfected instrument of Tudor censorship, the proclamation of 1538.<sup>1</sup>

trobeled with her gostely enmy, the whiche moved her to incontynency, and to unclene levyng" (Wright, letter VII, p. 21).

<sup>1</sup> S.T.C. 7790; Steele, no. 176. See Bennett, p. 36 and Reed, pp. 178-83 for the Proclamation, which prohibited all printing of books that had not been examined and licenced.