The Assault on the Monasteries of England, and the Tyranny with Which it Was Done

But this did not cause Henry to mend his ways; to the contrary, he committed yet further insults, outrages, and attacks. For, after he had expelled every friar of the four mendicant orders from their houses, which he confiscated and took for himself, and had given the monastery of Saint Augustine in London, together with its chapel and all its movables, to his vicegerent, Cromwell (by whose advice all this had been done), who had begun to erect a sumptuous palace on the spot (which God did not permit him to finish),\(^2\) he convened a parliament in the year 1539, which met on April 28. Since none dared resist the king or reject the proposals made by Cromwell, it was declared that every monastery in the realm, of monks and nuns alike, belonged to the king, with all their incomes and lands arrogated to the crown.\(^3\) When this decree was published, you could see gangs of thugs seize the holy religious and drag them from their houses with insults and curses; they broke open the convent doors by force, and molested and raped the consecrated virgins, who were unable to remain in their profession but had nowhere to lay their heads. In London at this time four convents were looted, the nuns thrown out of their houses in a miserable, pitiful spectacle. And because certain clerics and religious spoke with some boldness about the king’s impious cruelty, they were imprisoned and later quartered.\(^4\)

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1 Sander, *De origine ac progressu*, 193–97.
2 Cromwell first occupied a large house at Austin Friars (the neighborhood surrounding the friary of the Augustinian Friars) in London in 1522. Ten years later, he received a ninety-nine-year lease of further holdings formerly belonging to the Augustinian Friars. The friary was dissolved in 1539, and Cromwell appropriated the entire property. Loades, *Thomas Cromwell*, 17.
4 Sander identifies these as “two London priests, one of whom was the rector of the parish of Wandsworth, and a servant who attended to him, along with a certain monk by the name of Waire [Mairus].” Sander, *De origine ac progressu*, 194.

 Cf. “The viij of July Griffith Clarke vycar of wandsworth with his chapleine & his seruaunt and fryer Waire, were all fower hanged & quartered at S. Thomas waterings.” Stow, *Summarie*, 443.
Not satisfied with having stripped the religious of their possessions, the king found another, even more diabolical scheme to strip them of their souls. He had a public proclamation written in the name of the religious themselves, in which they begged the king, as the highest judge, to free them from the servitude and captivity of the monasteries, at manifest peril of their souls, and give them liberty, and that, receiving this sovereign mercy from his hand, they would cede—and later did indeed cede—to him, freely and unsought, of their own will and without compulsion, promise, duplicity, or pressure from anyone, the monasteries, estates, and incomes they had unjustly possessed hitherto, placing them in the hands of His Majesty, to whom they rightly belonged.\footnote{The effusive preamble to 31 Hen. 8. c. 13 declared, “Where diverse and sundrie Abbotts Priours Abbesses Prioresse and other Ecclesiasticall Governours and Governesses of diverse Monasteries Abbathies Priories Nonries Colleges Hospitalls Houses of Friers and other religious and ecclesiastical Houses and places within this our Soveraigne Lorde the Kings Realme of Englande and Wales, of their owne free and voluntarie myndes good willes and assents, without constraynte coaction or compulsion of any manner of person or persons [...] by the due order and course of the comen lawes of this his Realme of Englande, and by their sufficient writings of recorde under their covent and comen seales, have severally geven graunted and by the same their writings severally confirmed all their saide Monasteries Abbathies Priories Nonries Colleges Hospitals Houses of Friers and other religious and ecclesiastical houses & places, and all their Scites Circuite and precynctes of the same, and all and singular their Mannors Lordshiphs Graunges Meeses landes tenants meadowes pastures rents revercions services woodes tithes pencersions porcions churches chappells advousons patronages annuities rights entres condicions commons lets courtes libertyes privileges and frachesies appertyning or in anywise belonging to any suche [...] to our saide Soveraigne Lorde his heires and successors for ever.” \textit{sr}, 3:733.}

All this, to appear to do what he did not out of greed for the goods he plundered, but in acquiescence to the pleas of the religious themselves. For this is the hypocrisy and fraudulence of the heretics in disguising their wickedness, to commit them and place the blame on their victims, and so get away with tyranny and violence. The king sent his minions to every monastery with this impious document to bring the abbots and monastics to sign and seal it, either by pressure or by force. Those who, overcome by terror or weakness, obeyed them were favored and showered with gifts, as godly men, peace-loving and law-abiding, friends to the commonweal. And those who remained constant and firm were abused and slandered, called pharisaical, arrogant, seditious, and rebels against the king. And so at this time there was no creature in England more wretched than the benighted religious, for they could not but lose the goods of their order, unless they lost their souls. When this trick did not fall out as the king had hoped, he martyred three abbots and two clerics for