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Revision

Thomas Cromwell: radical of the Reformation?

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Consider the following question, then look at the sample student response and the examiner's commentary (in red).

Question

Assess the reasons for Thomas Cromwell's fall from power in 1540.

Student answer with commentary

Although Cromwell had given Henry his divorce from Catherine of Aragon, sealed the break with Rome and brought the king considerable wealth through the dissolution of the monasteries, his fall from power in 1540 was rapid. He had been made Earl of Essex only three months before his fall – a clear sign of his favour at the start of the year. This last event suggests that it was not the disastrous Cleves marriage that was the most important factor, nor his more radical religious views, but that he was the victim of a factional struggle. This culminated in the Duke of Norfolk and Stephen Gardiner manipulating the king to convince him of a range of rumours about Cromwell. They also offered the king an alternative to Anne of Cleves, in the form of Norfolk's second niece, Catherine Howard.

The opening paragraph places the fall in context and also notes the possible reasons that have been used to explain Cromwell's rapid fall. It goes on to offer a view and some support for the view that faction was the most important reason. The key to a strong answer will be to evaluate the relative importance of the outlined factors and maintain a consistent line of argument.

Although the failure of the Cleves marriage is often seen as the most important cause of his fall, it was more of an underlying factor. The marriage had, in 1538, been considered essential as there were fears of a Catholic crusade against England following a Franco–Habsburg rapprochement and the need for England to therefore find allies on the continent. Henry had found Anne unattractive and commented that 'If I had known as much as I know now, she should never have come into this realm.' Although Henry was encouraged to blame Cromwell for the disastrous and now unnecessary marriage, it was not this that brought about his fall. Soon afterwards Henry rewarded Cromwell with the title Earl of Essex, which was very unusual for someone without noble connections. It is therefore very unlikely that Henry would have rewarded him with the title if he intended to remove him.

The importance of the Cleves marriage is analysed in a balanced way, with both sides of the argument discussed. Detailed knowledge and a contemporary quotation are used to show the depth of knowledge of the candidate. The last sentence offers a judgement, which has been

supported in the previous sentence and follows the line of argument offered in the opening paragraph.

However, by 1540 the need for the Protestant alliance had ended as Franco–Habsburg hostilities had recommenced. This rendered the Cleves marriage unnecessary and, given Henry’s view of Anne, would have angered Henry. It would therefore have played an underlying role in Cromwell’s fall, but as he was still ennobled after this it is difficult to argue that it was the most important factor.

To some extent the issue raised in the previous paragraph is further developed, focusing on the international relations that had made the marriage necessary and how circumstances had changed. Once again, the importance of the issue is analysed and a judgement is reached that it would have been an underlying factor.

When Cromwell was arrested and charged with treason in June 1540, one of the charges against him was heresy, suggesting that religion was a major factor in his fall. Cromwell had been the architect of Henry’s divorce from Catherine of Aragon and the subsequent break with Rome, as well as the dissolution of the monasteries, Ten Articles and the Great Bible, all suggesting moves towards a reformed religion. It was further claimed by those who brought the charges that he intended to introduce a fully Protestant church in England. It is certainly true that such a plan would worry Henry, given his reaction to those who denied transubstantiation, such as John Lambert who was burned in 1538. However, Cromwell would have been aware of Henry’s views and aversion to radical changes. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, also had radical views, and it is almost certain that Henry was aware of his marriage, but he still escaped punishment. It is therefore most likely that religion was used as an excuse by his opponents as the charges of heresy could be made to stick given his links to a Protestant circle in Calais.

The response discusses the issue of religion as it was one of the charges made against Cromwell. There is detailed evidence to show Cromwell did have evangelical views and links to more radical religious groups. However, the discussion is balanced and again a judgement as to its importance is reached and is supported through the evidence of Cranmer.

This suggests that the most convincing explanation for his fall was faction. There is little doubt that Cromwell was unpopular with much of the nobility. They viewed him, much like Wolsey, as an upstart who had usurped their traditional position as chief advisors to the monarch. This led MacCulloch to argue that ‘Cromwell was destroyed by noblemen who considered themselves the natural rulers under the king.’ With the failure of the Cleves marriage and the ending of the need for a Protestant alliance, the Catholic faction of Norfolk and Gardiner were able to exploit the situation. They were able to entice Henry with the young, and supposedly innocent, nineteen-year-old Catherine Howard. Following the failure of the Cleves marriage, it is hard to deny that this flattered the ageing monarch, who became infatuated with her. This development increased the influence of Norfolk and Gardiner, who were therefore able to persuade Henry of the validity of the rumours surrounding Cromwell’s religious aims. Their influence, and Henry’s infatuation with Catherine, also allowed them to persuade the king to rush through the Act of Attainder, which resulted in Cromwell’s execution. It was this development that resulted in Cromwell’s rapid fall from being created Earl of Essex in April 1540 to his execution in July. Furthermore, his execution took place on the same day that Henry married Catherine Howard, which is further evidence that his fall was the result of faction and his opponents’ ability to exploit the underlying factors.

The most important factor is then considered, and the response shows how the underlying factors of the marriage and Cromwell’s religious views were used by the Conservative faction

of Norfolk and Gardiner to remove Cromwell. Although candidates are usually encouraged to deal with the main factor first, this approach works well in this response as it shows how they were able to exploit the situation. There is evidence to support the judgement and a convincing view, which follows from the opening paragraph, is reached.

Cromwell had brought about many significant changes and should have been indispensable to Henry, having considerably increased royal power. Despite the failure of the Cleves marriage, Cromwell did not fall immediately. His religious views were known by the king, suggesting they were little more than an excuse used by his opponents. It was the changing international situation and the ending of the need for the Protestant Cleve alliance that allowed his opponents to pounce. They exploited the underlying issues of the failed marriage and his religious views, while offering an alternative in the form of Catherine Howard, which flattered Henry's ego after the Cleves debacle.

The conclusion follows from the opening, and this has been the consistent line throughout the response. This is clearly explained to a logical conclusion, which has been well-supported and would therefore place the response in the highest level.

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