

# **Queens, Nuns, Pregnant Women and Mothers: Consequences for Women of Henry VIII's 1534 Decree on Bidding Prayers**

J. Frank Henderson

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## **Introduction**

In 1534 changes were made in the general intercessions or bidding prayers used regularly in Sunday worship in English parishes. The intended aim of this revision was to name the king and his successors as head of the church in England as well as sovereign of the realm. Henry took the pope's place in the structure of the prayer and the pope was entirely omitted from its text. The bishops were subordinated to the king.

Henry's decree, however, had a number of other consequences, among which were several changes in the naming of women. Thus queens, princesses and other female (and male) members of the royal family received increased prominence. Other women who had traditionally been named in parish bidding prayers were omitted, including nuns, anchoresses and other female religious; pregnant women and other women in local parish and civic communities; and deceased mothers, sisters, godmothers and other deceased women.

Here I describe these changes in the status of women in parish bidding prayers in England and consider why they came about.

The story begins, of course, with the bidding prayers as they were before Henry's 1534 decree. In England these prayers had been used since at least A.D. 1000.

Bidding prayers were wide-ranging in scope: church and society at large were prayed for, as were all ranks of clergy from pope to local pastors; members and leaders of religious orders; royalty and nobility and cities. In the context of the Sunday parish mass, a large part of the prayers was directed to naming members of the local parish community: those present and those absent, travelers and pilgrims, farmers and merchants, the sick and the poor, pregnant women, benefactors, those that lived good lives and those that did not, and others. Deceased relatives, friends, parishioners and others were prayed for at some length as well.

The general intercessions were intended to be relevant to each time and place; hence they were composed locally and varied in content, wording and order; each surviving text is distinct. At the same time, they are similar in that they followed the same general pattern. They were never written or printed in the missal in place, though they might be found on end pages, in margins, at the end of sermons, or simply on separate sheets.

Medieval general intercessions from across Europe are identified in my *Medieval General Intercessions: Bibliography of Texts and Sources*. The ways in which individual local church communities adapted the contents of these intercessions is considered in my *Women and Medieval General Intercessions: Introduction*.

It is this tradition that changed in the time of Henry VIII, and the story will be told in part through use of excerpts of bidding prayers composed before and after 1534. The source of each excerpt prior to 1534 is identified and linked to the *Bibliography* through the use of a unique designator; full bibliographic information is therefore given only in the *Bibliography*. These designators have four elements: (1) a code for the country of origin or equivalent, in this case always EN=England. (2) Within each of these groups the general intercessions are numbered consecutively, in approximate chronological order. (3) The name of a place or person with whom each text is associated is given next. (4) Finally, the approximate date of composition is provided.

### **Sources**

H. O. Coxe, *Forms of Bidding Prayer*. Oxford: John Henry Parker 1840

David Wilkins, *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae, ab anno MCCCL ad annum MDXLV*. Lundini: R Gosling et al MDCCXXXVII. Reprint: Bruxelles: Culture et Civilisation, 1964

F. E. Brightman, *The English Rite*, 2 vol. London: Rivingtons, 1921

Edgar Hoskins, *Horae Beatae Mariae Virginis or Sarum and York Primers with Kindred Books and Primers of the Reformed Roman Use*. London: Longmans Green 1901

### **Elevated Status of Queens, Princesses and Other Royal Women**

“Queens” *here* refers to women who are wives of male sovereigns (kings) but who did not rule as sovereigns themselves. Thus Mary and Elizabeth (and Victoria) are not considered here, as those women were *sovereigns*; see the separate document, *Sovereign and pope in English bidding prayers before and after 1534*.

Medieval bidding prayer often included an intention for the queen, and sometimes also for other members of the royal family. A few examples are given here. A fuller set of appropriate texts from across Europe is given in a separate document: *Queens and noblewomen in medieval general intercessions: Documentation*

for the quene, and for all here childryn, for the prince  
EN-5. Worchester 1349

for our lyege lady the quene, my lorde the prynce, and all the noble progenye of them  
EN-36. Wynchen de Worde 1483= EN-37. Caxton 1483

for the Prince, for the Ladye the Kinges Mother, with all their progeneye  
EN-38. Becon 1483

It may be noted that these references to the queen never include her personal name, nor the names of princesses or other royal children. (It cannot be excluded that such names were added when the prayer was read aloud in church on Sunday; however, this is never indicated in the text or in accompanying rubrics.)

### ***Queens and Royal Children after 1534***

The next set of excerpts are taken from bidding prayers used during the reign of Henry VIII from 1534 to his death in early 1547. The main difference is that personal names of queens, princesses, princes and dowager queens are used together with titles and some honorific expressions. These women have faces whereas those of the older prayers do not. At least in part these prayers illustrate the course of the king’s marriages.

1534 [Henry VIII]

for the most gracious Lady Queen Anne his wife,  
and for the Lady Elizabeth, daughter and heir to them both  
Coxe 56  
Wilkins 3, 783

[Ann Boleyn, m 1533, d 1536, mother of Elizabeth.]

1536 [Henry VIII]

and the most noble and virtuous Lady Queen Jane, his most lawful wife  
Coxe 58

[Jane Seymour, m 1536, d 1537, mother of Edward.]

1539 [Henry VIII]  
and queen Anne his wife  
and for the prosperite of the noble Prynce Edworde his sonne.  
Coxe 63

[Anne of Cleves, m 1540.]

1541 [Henry VIII]  
And for the prosperity of the noble Prince Edward his son.  
Hoskins 155

1544 [Henry VIII]  
Also ye shall pray for Queen Katherine that now is,  
and for our most noble Prince Edward.  
Hoskins 156

[Katherine Parr, m 1543, not Katherine Howard, m 1540.]

1546 [Henry VIII]  
and for Queen Katherine, Prince Edward,  
and for the Lady Mary and the Lady Elizabeth...  
Coxe 71-72

[Katherine Parr, prior to Henry's death in January 1547.]

1547 [Edward VI]  
and for Quene Katerine, dowagier,  
and also for my Lady Mary and my Lady Elizabeth the Kynge's Susters.  
Coxe 76

[Katherine Parr, after the death of Henry and accession of Edward VI..]

1547-1548 [Edward VI]  
And for quene Katerine dowagier.  
And also for my lady Mary, and my lady Elizabeth the kynges susters.  
Brightman 2, 1050  
[Katherine Parr]  
[Edward reigned 1547-1553.]

1550 [Edward VI]

Q. Katharine Dowager, my Lady Maries grace,  
and my Lady Elizabeth's grace,  
your Majesties most dear sisters...

Coxe 82

[Katherine Parr]

[temp Edward VI]

for his most noble sisters Mary and Elizabeth...

Coxe 85

[Edward reigned 1547-1553.]

The one bidding prayers from the reign of Mary I (1553-1558) does not mention her sister Elizabeth, and Elizabeth I (1559-1603) had no close female relatives. After the reign of Elizabeth I, the tradition of praying for royal women by name continued.

1603 [James I]

Ye shall also pray for our gracious Queene Anne, the noble Prince Charles, Frederick Prince Elector Palatine, and the Lady Elizabeth his wife.

Coxe 141

1633 [Charles I]

his virtuous Lady the Queene, the Prince, the Lady Mary, the young Duke his royall progenie, with the Princess Palatine, his only sister, and her issue

Coxe 161

temp Charles II

also for our gracious Lady Mary the Queen Mother, for the most illustrious prince James, duke of York, and for the whole Royal family

Coxe 173

1662 [Charles]

pro Regina matre, Henrietta Maria, pro illustrissimo principe, Jacobo duce Eboracensi, aliisque quibuscunque e regis stemmate oriundis.

Coxe 176

1668 [James II]

Let us pray likewise ffor his Royall consort our gracious Queen Mary Catherine Queen Dowager his Royall Highnesse the Prince of Wales their Royall highnesses Mary princesse of Orange the Princesse Anne of Denmark, & the rest of the Royall family.

Brightmann 2, 1052

1840 [Victoria]

for Adelaide the Queen Dowager, and all the Royal family.  
Coxe 180

In conclusion, queens, princesses, dowager queens, queen mothers, etc. were given prominence in bidding prayers after 1534 through the use of their names, titles, and other expansive language.

### **Disappearance of Nuns, Anchoresses and Other Women Religious**

A second consequence of Henry VIII's 1534 decree was to make women other than royalty disappear from the bidding prayer.

#### ***Nuns***

The first group to be considered is nuns, anchoresses and other women "religious" - women members of religious orders and similar communities. As seen in the following examples, abbesses and prioresses, other nuns, anchoresses and other "women of religion" were frequently named in medieval general intercessions. They were included together with male religious and hermits. For a more complete set of texts from across Europe, see the separate document, *Women religious in medieval general intercessions: Documentation*

Ye shall bydde for abbotis, for prioris, for moonks, for chanonns, for freris, for ancris, for heremytes, and for all religious  
EN-5. Worchester 1349

for the Prioresse of Cranbous, and for alle the couent, and for ... alle men and wommen of religioun  
EN-10. Cranbone 1389

Also ye shall prairie for abbottes and priours abbatis and prioris;  
for monkes, chanons, frers and nunnys,  
and for all other men and women of relygion  
EN-13. London 15<sup>th</sup> c

All men and women of religion  
EN-22. Butley, 1401; EN-23. York 1405; EN-27. York, 1440; EN-36. Wynchen de Worde, 1483; EN-37. Caxton 1483; EN-39. Shrewsbury 1484; EN-40. York 1490

Bidding prayers after 1534 made no reference to religious women and men at all.

### **Disappearance of Pregnant Women and Other Women of the Parish**

Pregnant women and other women of the parish were likewise no longer included in parish bidding prayers after the decree of 1534. For more extensive sets of texts from across Europe, see the separate documents *Pregnant women in medieval general intercessions: Documentation*; *Women pilgrims in medieval general intercessions: Documentation*; and *Gild sisters in medieval general intercessions: Documentation*

### ***Pregnant Women***

As seen from the examples that follow, pregnant women and their unborn children were regularly included in parish bidding prayers. Furthermore, this section of the bidding prayer was longer than many other intentions; they were an important concern of the community.

For women that ben with cheldern, that God grunte to tham a gud delyveraunce and purificacion, to there children crystendome and confirmacion.

EN-13. London 15<sup>th</sup> c

For alle wymmen that arren bounden wit childe that god deliuere hem with lofe

EN-17. York 1400

For all the women which be in our ladyes bandes and with chyld in this parysshe or in any other, that god sende to them fayre delyueraunce, to theyr chyldren ryght shape, name, and crystendome, and to the mothers, purificacion.

EN-36. -Wynchen de Worde 1483 = EN-37. Caxton 1483

We shall pray also for all women that be with chylde in this parysshe or any other, that god conforte them and sende the childe christendom and the moder purificacion of holy chirche, and releacyng of payne in theyr travaillyng.

EN-42. York 1509

After 1534 the intention for pregnant women was omitted entirely.

### ***Gild Sisters***

Women members of religious guilds (“gild sisters” using an older spelling convention) and confraternities are named in a certain number of medieval general intercessions

Wutan we begiddan ...for ure gildan 7 gildsweostran

[modern English translation]

Let us pray ... for our gild-fellows and gild-sisters]

EN-1. York 1050

And also you shall pray especially for the brothers and the sisters of Saint Peter minister of York and of Saint John of Beverley and of Saint Wilfrid of Ripon and for all that you are beholden unto and for all that God would you pray for say a Pater noster and Ave.

EN-23. York 1405

Again, such intentions disappeared after 11534.

### ***Good Wives***

Another regular intention had to do with the practice of blessing bread and sharing it after Sunday mass; this was different than holy communion. This bread was supplied by a couple in the parish who were frequently referred to as good men and good wives, or good men and good women. Less frequently they were “him and her” or “simply “those/them” who brought the loaf. The following excerpts illustrate this point.

Also ye shall pray for the gudman and gudwyff that this day brogth or sent brede unto the chyrch, of the which holy brede is to be made...

EN-13. London 15<sup>th</sup> c

Also ye shall praye for the good man or woman that thys daye geveth bread to make the holy lofe...

EN-38. Becon 1483/1563

This intention too disappeared from the Sunday prayers following Henry’s 1534 decree. (Henry later also abolished the entire practice of holy bread.)

### ***Other Women of the Parish***

Still other women of the parish were occasionally mentioned in the bidding prayers. This is shown in the following excerpts.

Yee shall praie also for all palmers and pilgrims, for all manere men and wymmen which any gude gate hath gone, goth or shall go

EN-13. London 15<sup>th</sup> c

Ye schall pray also specyally for all those gud men and wemen that dewly and trwly pays thayr tythes, thayr offermans, thayr dewtys to god and to holy kyrke, lyke as yay ar bound by ye law

EN-39. Shrewsbury 1484

Ye shall pray also specyally for all those good men and women that gyffes or beqwytyes

any manner of guddys unto thys kyrke, as bokes, bollys, cloys, lawnpes, lyght, awtor clothe, or towell, or any maner of a nowr menttys [*ornaments*], wherthrought ye servyce of Allmyghty God hase ben bettyr maynteyneyd a for tyme....

EN-39. Shrewsbury 1484

Also yee shale praye... for men and women which briggeis or way makygth or mendigth

EN-13. London 15<sup>th</sup> c

These women became invisible after 1534.

### **Disappearance of Deceased Mothers, Godmothers and Other Women**

Prayers for the dead constituted an important and substantial section of medieval bidding prayers. The following excerpts simply name one's deceased relatives. These are always named in gender-balanced constructions that include spiritual relationships (godmother) as well as biological relationships. For fuller references from across Europe, see the separate document, *Deceased women in medieval general intercessions: Documentation*.

Ye schulle kneelen down and bydde for fader sowle, for moder sawle, for God-fader sowle, for God-moder sawle, for children's sawles, and for alle the sawles of our bredryn and sosteres sawles...

EN-5. Worcester 1349

yowr fader sowle, yowr modyr sowle, your godfader sowles, your godmodyr sowles, yowr brodyr sowles, yowr systor sowles, your oyne sowles, yowr awnt sowles, and for all your kynne sowles

EN-39. Shrewsbury 1484

After Henry VIII's decree, deceased mothers et al. as real women virtually disappeared from the bidding prayer. Henry's 1534 decree did include a provision for praying for the dead, however.

And finally for the souls of all them that be dead

Coxe 56-57

Wilkins 3, 783

As seen in the following example, such texts were simple and brief; no one is named and no specific categories of persons or relationships are named; the dead are faceless and without gender. This is illustrated in the following excerpts.

1536

Thirdly, ye shall pray for the souls that be departed, abiding the mercy of Almighty God,

that it may please Him the rather, at the contemplation of our prayers, to grant them the fruition of his presence.

Coxe 58

Similar nameless and genderless intentions were used in most subsequent prayers, which will not be given here in full. The following text however, contains interesting additions made either during the reign of Mary I or under Edward VI by someone of Catholic sympathies.

1547-1548

Thyrdly, yow shall pray for all them that be departed out of thys worlde, yn the faithe of Chryste, that they with us, and we withe them, at the day of Iudgement, may reeste bothe body and soule, with Abraham, Isaac, and Iacob, un the kyngdome of heauen. And of your cherytie pray for the soules of my father and mothers, and for all the soules that we ben bonde to pray for. And of your charytie for the soules of Master John Colman, Elizabeth hys wyffe, Master Thomas Bele, Alys hys wyf... And for all Christien soules. Amen.

Brightman 2, 1054

## Discussion

The primary aim of Henry VIII's 1534 decree on bidding prayers was to communicate and promote his view that he was not only sovereign of the realm but also supreme head of the church in England. This was achieved by omitting any reference to the pope, by naming the sovereign first (before the bishops), and by clearly stating that he was head of the church. The new text was imposed on all English churches as the only permissible form of bidding prayer for use in Sunday worship. I shall refer to these changes as "primary".

When compared with typical parish bidding prayers from the period before 1534, however, it is clear that Henry's text differs in a number of respects that had little or nothing to do with his claim to supremacy. I refer to these as "secondary" changes. The present study concerns some consequences of these secondary changes for women. Compared to pre-1534 prayers, members of the royal family (mostly female) receive greater prominence than before, while religious women, women of the parish, and deceased women, simply disappear.

Though gender has here been used as a category for analysis and study, this was not the issue with respect to these changes; male religious, men of the parish, and deceased men also disappeared, while male members of the royal family received greater attention.

It may be that disappearance of female and male religious occurred in anticipation of the dissolution of the monasteries – though this was still several years in the future. It may also be that decreased attention was paid to the dead for theological reasons – however the earliest texts (from Henry's reign) show no direct evidence for this.

One point is clear: the several changes reported here had the result of shifting the focus of

attention away from the parish and other local church communities and to the king, the nation, and the national church. They therefore give indirect support to Henry both as sovereign and as head of the church.

There is no doubt that the primary changes made by Henry in the text of the bidding prayer were deliberate and intentional. Were the secondary changes studied here also intentional or did they have some other basis? I suggest that to deliberately plan and carry out all of the secondary changes is simply too complex to be practical. Instead, I suggest that the starting place for Henry's revision was not a typical parish bidding prayer at all, but rather a form of this prayer that already included at least most of the secondary changes; Henry then merely modified the text with respect to supremacy. I suggest further that Henry's starting place was a form of bidding prayer in use by the royal court – which was itself a type of local worshipping community with its own practices and with some of its own unique liturgical texts. See for example the *Liber Regie Capelle* (ed. W. Ullmann. London. Henry Bradshaw Society 92. London 1961) and the separate document, *Queen Mary I and a court form of bidding prayer in medieval England*

This form of bidding prayer had a long trajectory, from the time of Henry VIII almost until today. It continued chiefly to be a prayer for the monarchy and national church.