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# Order and conflict

Anthony Ascham and  
English political thought, 1648–50

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MARCO BARDUCCI

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*In memory of Vittorio Conti and Salvo Mastellone, my mentors and friends*



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## Preface



This book was originally intended as a revised version of my work *Anthony Ascham ed il pensiero politico inglese* (Florence: Centro Editoriale Toscano, 2008). However, while reworking the Italian text with an eye to an English audience, I began a process of general revision and enrichment which ultimately resulted in a different book. This book incorporates the results of research that I have conducted since 2008, in libraries and archives in the USA, Italy and the UK. In particular, this work has been completed in my time as a fellow at the Folger Shakspeare Library (Washington DC). I would like to thank the Centro Editoriale Toscano for having allowed me to reproduce some parts of [Chapters 1](#) and [3](#) of the original book. Most of all, I would like to thank Glenn Burgess, J. C. Davis, Jason T. Peacey, Mark Somos and Blair Worden for having encouraged me to present this work to an English audience, and for their immensely useful comments and revisions on drafts of the work in manuscript. I owe a great debt to Alan Marshall, who patiently read the manuscript and helped me to prepare it for publication, and to Justin Champion, who constantly supported and encouraged me during the preparation of this book. Finally, I am grateful to the ‘Politics, culture and society in early modern Britain’ series editors at Manchester University Press, who helped me to reorganise and thereby improve the material here presented.



## Introduction



The Puritan Revolution of mid-seventeenth-century England produced an explosion of new and important political thinking. But while due attention has been given to the most famous thinkers, Thomas Hobbes, Sir Robert Filmer and the Levellers, there are other important figures who have been relatively neglected, of whom Anthony Ascham is one. Ascham does attract a certain amount of scholarly interest, but his ideas have not been given their proper due or been rigorously analysed. Therefore, this is the first full-scale study of Ascham's political thought.

During the crucial period between the Second Civil War and the aftermath of the abolition of monarchy and the establishment of the English Republic, when he served as official pamphleteer of Parliament and the republican government, Ascham did not develop a completely innovative political theory. Nonetheless, the arguments exposed in Ascham's works paved the way for much of contemporary political discussion. Ascham put forward a complex argument in support of Parliament's claims for obedience which drew on the political thought of Grotius, Hobbes, Selden, Filmer and Machiavelli. He was capable of combining ideas taken from these authors and turning them into a powerful instrument of propaganda to be deployed to the service of the political agenda of his Independent patrons in Parliament. Ascham thus represents a case in point of the interaction between politics, propaganda and political thought in the context of the English Civil Wars. What he said, how he said it, and the kind of audience he addressed, strictly depended on and were consistent with the political aims of the politicians who sponsored him.

Ascham's works were intended to convince lay Presbyterians and royalists to adhere to the policy of national pacification implemented from 1648 by the Independent 'party' within Parliament. Ascham's political works, therefore, were not the result of theoretical speculations or of detached analyses: they were expressly devised to convince people to take sides in the context of the ongoing revolution. Ascham's political ideas and languages were tailored,

on the one side, to the political message he and his political patrons wanted communicating to their audience, and on the other, to the political, religious and cultural expectations of their intended recipients. Our investigation of Ascham's works will therefore bring together an intellectual analysis of his political thought and an analysis of the interaction between politics, propaganda and political ideas.

## LIFE AND WORKS

The fate of many English republican ambassadors between 1649 and 1650 was tragic. The story of Isaac Dorislaus, murdered at The Hague by royalist killers because of his participation in Charles I's proceeding, is well known.<sup>1</sup> That of Anthony Ascham, the subject of this study, is less so.

Ascham, initially designated by the Council of State as 'agent' of the Republic to the Merchant Company of Hamburg, became eventually 'official Agent' to Madrid.<sup>2</sup> In the Spanish capital there were some exiled Cavaliers who served as both official and unofficial envoys from Charles II, such as Edward Hyde, Lord Cottington, Richard Fanshawe and Lord Goring, whose task consisted mainly of collecting funds among English merchants in Spain to be earmarked to the royalist armies operating in Scotland and Ireland.<sup>3</sup> Ascham's embassy to Madrid was regarded by royalist envoys as a serious threat to their mission. Hyde and Fanshawe's wife Ann reported that 'some young men meeting in the street with Mr Progers, a gentlemen belonging to the Lord Ambassador Cottington, and Mr Sparkes, an English merchant' complained about 'the impudence of this As[cham] to come a public Minister from rebels to a court where there were two ambassadors from the king'.<sup>4</sup> The attitude of Charles II's agents towards the envoys from the republican government was surely influenced by a declaration of 1649 of the king's legitimate heir. He affirmed his firm purpose 'to pursue and bring to their due punishment those bloody rebels who were either actors or contrivers' of his father's execution, and the murder of Dorislaus left no doubts about the implications of such a declaration.<sup>5</sup> Hyde himself, in a message addressed to the English merchants in Spain, asked for their help 'to take and follow those courses and counsels which are most likely to take vengeance upon those incurable rebels'.<sup>6</sup>

Ascham and his retinue arrived in Madrid on Sunday 5 June. Here he was welcomed by the king's emissary Don Diego De Moreda, and then he and his servants were lodged in a decaying guesthouse located in a street named Cavalero de Grava. Ascham repeatedly complained about the accommodation which had been assigned to him. This was not much for its unhealthy and unhygienic conditions, rather for the fact that he did not find in Cavalero de Grava either guards for the protection of his retinue or 'locks or bolts on the doors or windows'.<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding, before the guards promised by the Spanish

Secretary De la Torre arrived, Ascham's assassins moved into action, killing him in the evening of 6 June 1650. Ascham's six murderers were the royalist exiles Henry and Valentin Progers, William Spark, 'and the swordsmen John William, Edward Halsall and William Arnet'.<sup>8</sup> According to a note in the *Thurloe State Papers* accurately describing these occurrences, while four hired assassins positioned themselves on the stairs in order to prevent any kind of assistance to the victims, the remaining two, probably Spark and William, proceeded with the assassination of Ascham.<sup>9</sup> Not being a Catholic, and also having red hair (a feature that Spaniards associated with Judah), Ascham was buried in the courtyard of the pension, while his baggage was hidden by his secretary. However, Hyde sent to Charles II an incised medal that Ascham carried around his neck, representing a crown slashed with a drift, with the words 'O. B. S. Newark 1646' below, as a reminder of Charles I's surrender to the Scots at the end of the first Civil War. Along with the medal, Charles II's envoys also found a book, presumably *Of the Confusions and Revolutions of Governments*.<sup>10</sup>

Jason T. Peacey has demonstrated the involvement of Edward Hyde and Lord Cottington in Ascham's murder by pointing to the role of Henry Progers, the murderer who was on the service of the royalist agents at the court of Madrid.<sup>11</sup> Hyde charged his secretary to spread at the court of Madrid slanderous rumours relating to Ascham, who was accused of having 'particularly fomented the death of the king, and the change of government' (arguably through his books). The retrieval of Ascham's medal and of 'a book of his, which was found among his papers' was invoked as an evidence of his plan 'to seduce and deceive' the King of Spain himself.<sup>12</sup>

Ascham's murder had a profound impact on English public opinion and thus produced immediate political reaction. At midnight on the day of Ascham's death, the Council of State ordered the ports of the north Atlantic Spanish coast sealed, in order to contain the spread of news of the event.<sup>13</sup> The Rump seized the opportunity to turn the whole episode to its favour by deploying the pages of the *Mercurius Politicus* to accuse Charles II of the homicide of Dorislaus and Ascham.<sup>14</sup> The parliamentary poet George Wither, in his *Historie of Parliament* ascribed responsibility for the republican ambassadors' execution to the 'slaves to that Tyranny from which this Commonwealth hath happily ... vindicated themselves'.<sup>15</sup> The Council of State urged George Fisher to bring Ascham's remains back to England, and gave him a letter to be forwarded to Philip IV requesting him, under the penalty of commercial reprisals, to proceed without delay to the sentencing of the 'sponsors and complices' of the ambush.<sup>16</sup> In 1651, Du Gard, 'printer to the Council of State', published *The Process and Pleadings in the Court of Spain upon the Death of Anthony Ascham*, James Howell's translation of Augustin del Hierro's prosecution of the accused originally titled *El doctor Don Augustin de Hierro contra don Iuan Guillin, Guillermo Esparque, Valentin Prost, Guillermo Arnet, y Odoardo vsual ... por auer muerto a traiciò, y de caso pensado Antonio*

*Asikan*. Three years later, Marchamont Nedham (editor of the official journal of the regime, the *Mercurius Politicus*) was charged to reply to some tracts in defence of the assassination which had appeared in Spain with *A True Account of the Late Bloody and Inhumane Conspiracy*.

To gain some idea of how strained the atmosphere was in England after the murders committed by royalist agents around Europe, we should turn to Thomas Hobbes's considerations of these events in his autobiography. After the publication of *Leviathan* in 1651, Hyde, as councillor to the now Scottish King Charles II, had interpreted Hobbes's masterpiece as a sort of defence of the republican government, and had informed the king of this opinion, thus provoking his wariness of the author exiled in Paris. The dangerous situation in which Hobbes found himself, between 1651 and 1652, reminded him of Ascham and Dorislaus ('Tunc venit in mentem mihi Dorislaus et Ascham/Tanquam proscriptio terror ubique aderat'), and convinced him to return to England and swear loyalty to the Republic in 1652.<sup>17</sup>

Ascham's murder troubled the court of Philip IV. The Spaniards feared for the safety of their London representative Alonso de Cardenas,<sup>18</sup> but there was most of all incertitude about how to deal with the trial of the English detainees.<sup>19</sup> Notwithstanding the diplomatic pressures on the government of Madrid, the contention between the two nations relating to Ascham's *affaire* remained unsettled, so that when Cromwell declared war on Spain in 1655, he could include the murder of the ambassador among its main causes.

Anthony Ascham's career began, as will be discussed, as a writer of popular political propaganda, and tragically ended with political assassination in the cause of the Republic. Anthony à Wood, much later, thus summarised his life:

The said A. Ascham, who was born of a genteel family, was educated in Eaton school, and thence elected into King's coll. in Cambridge, 1633. Afterwards, taking the degree of masters of arts, closed with the Presbyterians in the beginning of the rebellion, took the covenant, sided with the Independents, became a great creature of the long parliament (by whose authority he was made tutor to James, Duke of York), and an active person against his sovereign. At length being looked upon as sufficiently antimonarchical, was by the rump parliament sent their agent or resident at the court of Spain in the latter end of the year 1649.<sup>20</sup>

Ascham's reputation as being 'sufficiently antimonarchical' rested upon his writings, in which he had established an ability to converse with Presbyterian and royalist opponents to the parliamentary regime in the fierce ideological crucible of the 1640s.

The task of sketching an intellectual biography of Ascham is a testing one. The handful of biographical sources relating to him covers only short and scattered episodes of his life. Most of the information on Ascham derives from second-hand reports, and these were very often distorted for ideological purposes. Therefore, our understanding of Ascham's life principally coincides

with the knowledge of his works. He was born in 1614 at Boston, Lincolnshire. His father was Thomas Ascham, alderman of the town. We know that he studied at Eton from 1630 to 1634, and that in 1634 he was admitted to King's College, Cambridge. There he studied humanities, becoming a Bachelor of Arts in 1638. Even though it is unclear whether he gained the title of Master of Arts in 1642, Ascham continued to collaborate as a Fellow with King's College until his death.<sup>21</sup> The *Catalogue of the Provost, Fellows, and Scholars* reports that Ascham was regarded as a very cultivated man and that he travelled across Europe in his youth.<sup>22</sup> In 1646, after the recapture of Oxford from the parliamentary army, Charles I's younger sons, the thirteen-year-old Duke of York, the future James II, and his younger brother the Duke of Gloucester, were put under the authority of Algernon Percy, Earl of Northumberland. Percy was one of the makers of the New Model Army and a leading exponent of the group of Lords who sided with Parliament during the English revolution. It seems likely that it was the Earl of Northumberland who appointed Anthony Ascham as a tutor of Charles I's younger sons, preferring him to the famous mathematician Jonas Moore, who complained about the 'malicious and cunning subtlety' of his direct competitor.<sup>23</sup>

Between the end of 1647 and early 1648, Ascham wrote a manuscript treaty entitled *Of Marriage*, which, transcribed 'per J. Hinson' (on 12 October 1658), is now conserved at the University Library of Cambridge.<sup>24</sup> There is neither an introduction nor references or notes that explain why, or for whom Ascham wrote it.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, this manuscript is significant because it displays many of the political arguments that Ascham would later deploy in his published works. Ascham conceived matrimony as a union, which originated a social body (the family) which was essential for the continuation of humankind. On the ground of such a fundamental scope sanctioned by God, internecine conflicts between the two 'parties', coinciding with the husband and wife, had to be set aside. Along with arguing for the indissolubility of the matrimonial contract, Ascham's unpublished manuscript had a more contingent pedagogic intent, which related to his current activity as tutor of the king's younger children. Complementary to Ascham's emphasis upon order and stability both within the family and state, was his insistence on the importance of educating children to obedience and loyalty, rather than to liberty and rebellion.

Having terminated his appointment as tutor to James Duke of York no later than April 1648, Ascham devoted himself to making a career as a political writer. When, in the first months of 1648, Ascham devised his first political work for a group of Independents in Parliament, the *Discourse Wherein is Examined what is Particularly Lawfull during the Confusions and Revolutions of Government*, he transposed his views on the relations between order/stability and obedience/protection within the family, drafted in the manuscript on marriage, to the current political situation. The *Discourse* was published in London 'in St Paul's Churchyard' by the bookseller Humphrey Moseley, and