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Alison Shell
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Introduction

> . . . as for oral Traditions, what certainty can there be in them? What foundation of truth can be laid upon the breath of man? How do we see the reports vary, of those things which our eyes have seen done? How do they multiply in their passage, and either grow, or die upon hazards?[1]

What impact did post-Reformation Catholicism have on England's oral culture? The Protestant theologian Joseph Hall provides one point of entry in an influential passage from his tract *The Old Religion*, usually held to be the first occasion in English when oral tradition is named as such.[2] Attacking Catholics for investing tradition with an authority comparable to the written word of God, he makes pejorative use of the familiar idea that traditions could be passed down verbally as well as contained in writing, and links oral tradition, oral transmission and unreliability in a way that implies a strong pre-existing association between Catholics and orality.[3] As against the fixedness of print, oral communication was seen as having infinite potential to distort, and it became a powerful metaphor to express the fears about the fertility of ignorance that are so common in anti-Catholic polemic.

But this is only one reason why the association between orality and Catholicism was a natural one in post-Reformation England. An antiquarian would have pointed to the rich anecdotal tradition surrounding ruined abbeys, which kept England's Catholic past and the depredations of the Reformation alive in the popular memory, a puritan minister in a rural parish might well have deplored the use of popish spells among his flock, while a seminary priest would have recognised the missionary usefulness of ballad-singing to drive home the anti-Protestant message and commemorate martyrs. The four essays which make up the main body of this study address all these topics, while the conclusion asks how a specific body of mid-seventeenth-century radical Catholic scholars confronted the

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challenge of demonstrating a relationship between oral transmission and religious truth.

When I was researching my first book,[4] the Catholic presence in the oral culture of early modern England forced itself on my attention like an insistent background noise. This study is the result: written in a time when the study of orality has come of age, and benefiting from recent work which has charted the changes and continuities within England's oral culture during the couple of centuries following the advent of print.[5] Keith Thomas has drawn attention to the complexity of 'the interaction between contrasting forms of culture, literate and illiterate, oral and written', which gives this period of English history its 'peculiar fascination';[6] and certainly, attempts to determine what is covered by the term 'oral culture' at this time and place have been much improved by recent attempts to plot it against the continuance of written culture and the beginnings of print culture.[7] Loosely, one can say of early modern English society or any other that oral communication affects every branch of human activity, but one gets a better purchase on any culture that is not pre-literate by asking which functions of oral communication have been supplemented, altered or taken over by writing and print, and which remain the same.

Recent studies, notably those by Adam Fox, D. R. Woolf and Bruce R. Smith, have also done much to minimise the frustration brought about by the fact that, for this period, one's sources are necessarily at one remove or more from spoken discourse.[8] The essays that comprise this study draw, as these earlier works have also tended to do, from an eclectic range of sources: among them, Gothic novels, antiquarian and folklore studies, ballads in print and in manuscript, letters and polemical theology. This eclecticism is necessary because oral culture operates on many different levels of formality, ranging from extemporised conversational interchange to anecdotes refined in the retelling, and the scripted voicings of drama, liturgy and song; but in introducing a book which is bound to betray its author's training in university English departments, one needs to stress from the outset that consciously 'literary' texts at this period could have as close a relationship to orality as less formal communications. Edward Doughtie has written of the sixteenth century what continues to be true for some time after: 'Most of the really vital literary texts . . . were written with the possibility of oral performance in mind: sermons, plays, and song lyrics, of course – even romances and long poems were probably read aloud to small groups.'[9] Conversely, this book attempts to point up the literariness of texts recovered from, designed for or dependent upon oral transmission, whose particular formalities, sophistications and allusive complexities

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remain under-discussed by scholars: ballads, anecdotes, spells, even the powerful metaphors and hagiographical allusions inherent in an assumed name.[10] A great deal of this material remains, and much of it is powerfully evocative.

THE ORAL WORLD OF POST-REFORMATION ENGLAND: SURVIVAL, LOSS AND CHANGE

Whether one looks at this kind of material or at oral communication in general, an emphasis on the oral experience of early modern England is hardly denominationally specific in itself. Nevertheless, choosing a denominational filter is useful for a number of reasons: most of all because looking at oral culture can tell us a good deal about what happens to a once unchallenged religious body, after it has been driven underground. Because of the difficulty of controlling or censoring oral discourse, records of it are a natural place to find opinions running counter to the prevailing orthodoxy – perceived offensiveness is often the only reason why remarks get recorded at all. Besides, there is a strong link between religious conservatism and illiteracy at this date, and oral discourse was the only means which illiterates had of making their opinions felt.[11]

Records of conversations and of popular opinion testify to the potent afterlife of the old religion in the historical memories of both Catholics and non-Catholics, at all levels of society.[12] These memories could be merely factual, or – especially among the unlearned – numinous in a way that could invite accusations of superstition. William Fulke, for instance, cites a memory of medieval church-art called forth by sunbeams raying from behind a cloud, 'The common people cal it the desce[n]ding of the holy ghost, or our Ladies Assumption, because these things are painted after suche a sort', which from someone of Fulke's puritan sympathies is hardly a neutral observation.[13] The use of a present tense is striking in a pamphlet of the 1560s: perhaps an acknowledgement that several church windows and wall-paintings survived the early Tudor reformers, but also suggesting how what remained would have been a constant reminder of what was gone.[14] Medieval Catholicism also had a protracted afterlife in local legends with a supernatural element: especially those surrounding the ruins of abbeys and other religious houses, or commemorating a local saint.[15]

These memories could go beyond the specific to a generalised nostalgia. Surfacing obliquely in elite literary culture, most famously in the evocation of 'bare ruined choirs' in Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, this spirit finds a more direct expression in a widespread, stubborn, wistfully enhanced popular

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memory of more pleasant and charitable times.[16] As always with nostalgia, one does not need to have a first-hand memory of old times to regard them as intrinsically happier; so, as Protestant polemicists like John Favour suspected, this was an attitude which could be and was orally conveyed between the generations.

Are not these words . . . in the mouthes of all the old superstitious people of this land? And do not the yong learne of the old? *When we prayed to our Lady, and offred tapers on Candlemasse day, and heard Masse as we have done . . . then we had plentie of all things, and were well, we felt no evill. But since we have left the religion of our fathers . . . we have scarsnesse of all things.* The old superstitious people of Christ-Church in Hampshire, would say, that there came fewer Salmons up their River, since the masse went downe: for they were wont to come up when they heard the sacring Bell ring . . . the pretence is still, that the former way was the Old way, and that Old way was the best way.[17]

A ballad of the 1590s, 'A pleasant Dialogue between plaine Truth, and blind Ignorance', sets the scene by a ruined abbey. Truth asks Ignorance why he 'keepe[s] such gazing / on this decaied place: / The which for superstition / good Princes downe did race', to which Ignorance – a papist talking broad Mummerset – replies:

Ah, ah, che zmell thée now man,
che well know what thou art:
A vellow of new learning,
che wis not worth a vart:
Vor when we had the old Law
a mery world was then:[18]
and every thing was plenty,
among all sorts of men . . .

Chill tell thée what good vellow,
bevore the Vriers went hence,
A bushell of the best wheat
was zold for vortéene pence:
And vorty Eggs a penny,
that were both good and new:
All this che say my selfe haue séene
and yet ich am no Jew.[19]

But one should not assume, as this ballad does, that Catholic nostalgia and Catholic practice necessarily went together. As Eamon Duffy comments, 'nostalgic idealization of the Catholic past [became] as much the voice of the church papist, and of some backward-looking parish Anglicans, as of conscientiously recusant Catholics'.[20] In addition, some educated hearers

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of this type of oral memory, like John Aubrey, would have recorded it primarily for the evidence it yielded of a vanished past. But this in turn illustrates the intimate relationship between England's medieval past and the antiquarian spirit, which drew so many outright Catholics, crypto-Catholics and religious conservatives towards this kind of scholarship during penal times, and so spectacularly informed England's Catholic revival in the nineteenth century.[21] Ironically, pejorative records like Favour's are almost as efficacious in preserving evidence of the old religion, and have been plundered by later commentators for reasons which would have distressed the original collectors.[22] The numerous scholars to cite the puritan John Shaw's 1644 examination of an old man who saw a late performance of a Corpus Christi play in his youth, 'there was a man on a tree and blood ran down', are less interested in Shaw's complaint about religious ignorance in Lancashire than in the incidental evidence he gives about the continuance of medieval drama after the Reformation.[23]

Certainly, any survey of Catholicism's afterlife in post-Reformation oral culture must consider those literary genres which had a religious content, depended on oral delivery to get their message across, and were disliked by the Reformers. Drama, as Shaw's quotation suggests, is one such. Despite governmental hostility towards traditional popular religious drama from the time of the Henrician Reformation, it took a surprisingly long time to die out altogether – the Corpus Christi play which figures in the old man's reminiscence was last performed in 1603 – and had a profound effect on later secular drama.[24] But drama was vulnerable because of its high-profile collective nature, because of the expenditure it entailed and because public performances had to be regulated.[25] Carols fared better, despite falling foul of Protestantism because of their use of non-biblical legends and their association with religious festivals at a time when emphasis was shifting away from the liturgical year. It is obviously easier to sing a carol than put on a play; besides, sacred songs were more religiously versatile than theatrical performances which would have invited accusations of blasphemy and idolatry from protestantised authorities. Some pre-Reformation carols were capable of causing offence to Protestants, but survived nevertheless; most could have been sung by anyone who did not have a puritan objection to the genre.[26] In the climate of the 1630s, given the backing of traditional festive custom by Archbishop Laud and the Crown, carols could even have been seen as conspicuously orthodox; and later, Royalist members of the Church of England during the Interregnum developed considerable interest in the genre as part of an attempt to keep beleaguered Christmas traditions alive. New carols went on being composed after the Reformation, by both

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Catholics and Protestants; and other devotional verse related to the church's year, both Catholic- and Protestant-authored, could be co-opted into this tradition.[27] Thus, carols would often have fitted into mainstream culture as easily as many other texts from a Catholic source; though, given the large number of manuscript and print miscellanies with a Catholic provenance or including identifiably Catholic material which preserve carols, they might well have played a particularly prominent part in Catholic liturgical festivity and general merrymaking.[28]

Whenever a nineteenth-century antiquarian collected an oral rendition of a medieval carol containing Catholic matter, his text was not necessarily a reliable guide to the carol's original wording, but it did at least testify to the fact of its journey.[29] Carol-singing – sometimes with help from printed or written sources, sometimes perhaps independently of them – was a means of bearing medieval devotion through one of the most religiously alert and combative phases in England's history.[30] Whereas physical survivals from pre-Reformation England primarily depend on something being left alone, oral survivals imply a conscious decision to transmit. The reasons for this would have been various, ranging from an informed, polemicised desire to keep the old ways alive, to situations where the religious content was rendered unnoticeable by familiarity. Religious behaviour, even among the well-informed, is not always perfectly integrated, and ostensibly Protestant individuals might have transmitted doubtful carols for tradition's sake. Thus, carolling presents a picture of continuity and widely acceptable survival, perhaps one of the points where the oral cultures of Catholics, conformists and even dissenters would have overlapped or blurred – which must surely have been helped by the fact that, though associated with religious festivals, it was an optional extra as far as liturgy went, and had strong secular roots.[31]

To set against this, though, is the liturgical change that took place when Latin was replaced by the vernacular in church services and other set forms of prayer. Any assessment of how oral experience shifted when England became a Protestant nation must give full weight to the very differing responses that this change would have elicited.[32] It could have represented an impoverishment of spiritual experience at all social levels, not only among those who understood Latin – even if one should not expect either Catholic or Protestant commentators at this date to endorse what Rudolf Otto has called 'the spell exercised by the only half intelligible or wholly unintelligible language of devotion, and . . . the unquestionably real enhancement of the awe of the worshipper which this produces'.[33] As the history of Bible translation proves, it would be mistaken to equate

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Catholicism with a blanket hostility towards the vernacular, either in England or on the Continent; nevertheless, Catholics and religious conservatives during the English Reformation repeatedly asserted that the vernacular was irreverent and that translating sacred texts would invite heretical readings from unqualified interpreters.[34] In this context, it may seem paradoxical that the Latin Mass should ever have been a means of widening access. But by keeping Latin alive as a spoken language outside school and university contexts, post-Reformation Catholic liturgy would have given those who had no other access to classical education an impressionistic familiarity with Latin; and its usefulness would have gone beyond the merely educative, since the shared experience of difference would have been a means of reinforcing communal solidarity. Most of all, perhaps, it would have been a comforting reminder of the wider church.[35] A seventeenth-century Catholic dialogue marshals a number of these arguments, contending that even women and children understand 'not only the substance of the whole Mass, but the very words, as little children learne any language by often hearing it', and that the use of the vernacular isolates the English church from mainland Christendom. Latin, it reminds us, is the 'vulgar language of the Church', and by using it, Christians can be brought together in the way that they were before the Tower of Babel, whereas the 'learned'st clerk of any other nation cannot serve the poorest Parish in England upon a Sunday for want of a book of common prayer in his owne language'.[36]

Though the writer here is obviously giving an educated person's view of the changes, one should not necessarily assume that all uneducated worshippers would have preferred a vernacular liturgy, especially when the reforms first came in. The writer of a mid-sixteenth-century Catholic lament, commenting on the liturgical changes, explicitly identifies himself with the common voice in his lament that services in English only make people hypocritical, and may be picking up on a real grass-roots feeling:

> For our reverend father hath set forth an order,
> Our service to be said in our seignours tongue;
> As Solomon the sage set forth the scripture;
> Our suffrages, and services, with many a sweet song,
> With homilies, and godly books us among,
> That no stiff, stubborn stomacks we should freyke [i.e. 'humour']:
> But wretches nere worse to do poor men wrong;
> But that I little John Nobody dare not speake.
>
> For bribery was never so great, since born was our Lord,
> And whoredom was never les hated, sith Christ harrowed hel,
> And poor men are so sore punished commonly through the world,

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That it would grieve any one, that good is, to hear tel.
For al the homilies and good books, yet their hearts be so quel,
That if a man do amisse, with mischiefe they wil him wreake
[i.e. 'pursue revengefully'];
The fashion of these new fellows it is so vile and fell:
But that I little John Nobody dare not speake.[37]

As the poem ends, the speaker chooses a solitary existence, with his whereabouts known only to the other complainant. Using speech to lament enforced silence, the piece is consciously paradoxical in its very existence, and this is driven home by the multiple negations of the ending:

Thus in NO place, this NOBODY, in NO time I met,
Where NO man, ne NOUGHT was, nor NOTHING did appear;
Through the sound of a synagogue[38] for sorrow I swett,
That Aeolus through the eccho did cause me to hear.
Then I drew me down into a dale, whereas the dumb deer
Did shiver for a shower; but I shunted from a freyke:
For I would no wight in the world wist who I were,
But little John Nobody, that dare not once speake.

If it does nothing else, the current book should give the lie to Little John Nobody – though his complaint, and even his name, remind us that the association between Catholic literature and anonymity or pseudonymity is a pronounced one, which has had its effect on mainstream recognition of the material.[39] Besides, saying that one is unable to speak becomes less paradoxical if one reads the complaint as identifying impediments in communication, rather than the utter impossibility of communicating. Interpreted in this way, the libel is prophetic in foretelling many such impediments for the Catholic community during England's Protestant ascendancy, and not only among the uneducated.

Post-Reformation English Catholic priests, obliged to be citizens of Europe during their education, did not always find this a straightforwardly enabling experience, and perhaps it is not surprising that the most literary among them were often the most conscious of deficiency in their mother tongue. The prodigiously eloquent Edmund Campion, journeying back to England after several years on the Continent, believed his English might have become rusty and gave his companions a practice address. As it turned out, he need not have worried – an eyewitness reported that 'so rapid was the torrent of his words, that with impetuous violence [his speech] seemed to overflow its barriers'.[40] But Robert Southwell, who left England very young, had to re-learn English almost from scratch in preparation for the English mission, and wrote to the Rector of the English College in Rome

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just after his arrival in England stressing the enormous importance of training seminarians to preach in English.[41] Even so, over a century later, some missionaries were still not well enough equipped in their mother tongue. Philip, Cardinal Howard, told Bishop Burnet, on the latter's visit to Rome in 1685, that 'They came over young and retained all the English that they brought over with them, which was only the language of boys: But their education being among strangers they had formed themselves so upon that model that really they preached as Frenchmen or Italians in English words' – a factor which could only have exacerbated the usual polemical association of Catholicism with foreignness.[42]

Most of all, perhaps, the writer of 'Little John Nobody' pinpoints the sense of oral inhibition which pervades post-Reformation English Catholic discourse, both conversational and written, and which comes through in occasional anecdotes. One such survives of Richard Cosen, a Colchester keeper who was accused of having engaged in wild talk when cutting hay in 1562 with William Blackman. Praising the Duke of Guise, Cosen repeated a rumour that the Queen had had a child and died of it, and drew from Blackman an admission that he could hardly understand the changes over the past fifteen years. Thinking over the conversation later, Blackman's conscience became troubled and he unburdened himself to an alderman. Cosen was arrested and tried, and his statement makes it clear that he was trying to elicit an admission of religious allegiance from Blackman. The background to this altercation is hinted at by another of the witnesses, Cosen's maid Margaret Sander, in her testimony that Cosen and his wife 'talke moche agenst the use of the Curche that nowe is apointed And that they sytte singing together the old messe in myrthe by the fyresyde in the house . . .'.[43]

Set against the original exchange between Cosen and Blackman, this testimony vividly demonstrates the different conversational registers which Catholics would have needed: tentative advances and retreats when trying to draw out someone whose sympathies were unclear, unbuttoned talk when relaxing in the company of one's co-religionists. In the report of the Cosens 'singing together the old messe in myrthe', a defiantly polemicised use of Catholic matter not polemical in itself, one can see one way that the Catholic oral response to the English Reformation took shape. But literary material bearing the marks of engagement with the reformers, and designed for easy oral transmission, is perhaps a clearer sign than informal conversations of the Catholic oral challenge: and the next section will consider how, while denied official access to print and the pulpit, English Catholics deliberately attempted in other ways to match and counteract

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the effect that Protestant evangelism had had on the oral world of early modern England.

PROTESTANT CHALLENGES, CATHOLIC RESPONSES: THE REFORMATION INFLUENCE ON ORAL CULTURE

Almost from the beginning, the message of the English Reformation was addressed to a range of audiences: from the university-educated theologian to the labourer who could neither write nor read.[44] Inevitably, this affected how religious controversy and doctrinal affirmation came to be delivered. The oral medium of the sermon continued to be employed as a direct means of transmitting doctrine to the laity; the ideal of preaching was often used to signify the whole of the reformers' mission, and preachers themselves were sophisticated and entertaining communicators whose sermons stood up to comparison with plays.[45] As Andrew Pettegree has recently stressed, music was another important pedagogic tool for the Reformers in both ecclesiastical and popular contexts.[46] Most relevantly of all to the current study, popular literary genres were also used to spread the new message: ballads, liturgical parodies, or the rhymed taunt of an epigram. These had a strong presence within popular print culture, and invited oral dissemination – sometimes, as in the case of ballads, by a conjunction of illustrations, words and music.[47] Maximising evangelical effectiveness in a world shaped by the advent of print, the ubiquity of oral methods of communication, and remaining widespread illiteracy, they would have been used to provoke or enhance the millions of spoken arguments by which the Reformation was established, or resisted, within the population in general: arguments which, inside and outside the schools, must themselves have had their trajectories determined to some degree by patterns of disputation already embedded in European oral culture.[48]

Few ideological battles have foregrounded linguistic concerns so much as the Reformation, or been fought in such a rhetorically self-conscious manner; as Brian Cummings has recently pointed out, the points at issue between Catholic and Protestant demanded constant awareness to grammatical minutiae and linguistic nuance. The amount of attention paid at this period to the terms of debate had literary knock-on effects, engendering raptly attentive animadversion and utterly serious wordplay.[49] Lengthy, ritualistic and imaginatively charged dissociation was undertaken not only from the rhetoric of opponents, but from individual elements of their vocabulary. This is as noticeable in verse as in prose; in particular, verse is better fitted than prose to exploit iteration, and display a number of

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