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Alison Shell
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Introduction

My doctoral thesis on Catholicism in Tudor and Stuart drama, written between 1987 and 1991, was supervised jointly by a literary critic, a historian and a neo-Latinist – a state of affairs which, as I came to see, epitomised a deep uncertainty in early modern studies over the status of English Catholic writing. This book grew out of that early research; and as I write the introduction in the spring of 1998, Cambridge University Press is discussing how best to market the book to an audience divided between historians and literary critics. Not much has changed.

This is not a survey of Tudor and Stuart Catholic literature; such a book is badly needed, but for many aspects of the topic, far too little work has been done to make an adequate overview possible. My subject is a more specific one, the imaginative writing composed between the death of Mary I and the Restoration, which takes as its subject, or reacts to, the controversies between Catholics and Protestants or the penalties which successive Protestant governments imposed upon Catholics. This book comprises four essays, two subdivided, on aspects of this topic, with a bias towards poetry, drama, allegory, emblem and romance – though sermons and devotional and controversial religious prose have also been referred to on occasion.

It concentrates on imaginative writing, and also on writing where the internal logic of an argument is suborned to formal considerations, or considerations of genre: not necessarily decreasing its effectiveness, but enabling it to be effective in ways which have less to do with controversial rhetoric than with the expectations aroused by genre, or the mnemonic efficiency of a rigidly structured literary form. The idea of imaginative literature defines this book's main area of interest; but it is more of a convenience than a category, since many of the qualities one associates with imaginative writing – and,

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indeed, the lack of them – can operate quite independently of genre. Sermons can be full of extraordinary metaphor, didactic verse can be prosy. More generally, this book takes as its subject the literary response to an agenda set by theologians on both sides of the Catholic-Protestant divide. Sometimes the theologian and the agent of response are one and the same, sometimes they are far apart; but the poets, dramatists, emblematists and allegorists below were all dependent on polemical theology for their inspiration. A poem may transcribe doctrine, reflect doctrine or reflect upon doctrine; in odd cases, like that of Thomas Aquinas, a poem may crystallise a writer's theological formulations; but definitive theological argument is always in prose. Imaginative responses to theological agendas could be undertaken for mnemonic purposes, or to popularise, or to sweeten, or to complain – or simply because religious controversy so often results in the protracted demonisation of the other side, and demonisation is an imaginative process.

Imaginative writing has tended to be the province of the literary critic rather than the historian; and where historians do look at it, their use tends to be illustrative rather than analytical. To some extent the subject-matter of this book has been defined by former omissions: material that has not been felt to be the province of the church-historian, and about which, except in a very few cases, literary critics have been less than loquacious. This is hardly surprising, because Catholic imaginative writing, even in the case of important individuals like Southwell, Crashaw and Verstegan, is currently only available to the persevering, through facsimilisation and the second-hand academic bookseller. L. I. Guiney's *Recusant Poets* (1938), of which only volume I was completed,[1] remains the only substantial anthology for the topic. Literary-critical concern with Catholicism, as I comment in chapter two, has not been entirely absent; but it has centred around two areas, and tended to ignore the wider prospect.[2] The first of these areas is meditative verse: a phrase given wide currency in Louis Martz's *The Poetry of Meditation* (1954) but stalemated when critics recognised – quite correctly – that it was very difficult to identify a number of meditative techniques as being exclusively Catholic or exclusively Protestant. Secondly, the perceived necessity to say something new about canonical favourites has resulted in literary claims, of varying merit, being made about the permanent, temporary or possible Catholicism of Ford, Jonson, Shirley, Donne, and currently – again – about Shakespeare. But to

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identify Catholic elements in a writer's biography is one thing, and to use them to formulate a Catholic aesthetic, quite another; sometimes it has been well done, sometimes not. This book has largely bypassed those arguments – though they come from an attic which could do with spring-cleaning.[3]

History has covered a much broader range of Catholic material than literary criticism, and if this introduction says more about recent Catholic history than about Catholicism in English studies, it is partly because there *is* more to say. Perhaps church-historians are, by training, better equipped than literary critics to deal with the main preoccupation of this book, which can be defined – in distant homage to Max Weber – as the unintended *imaginative* consequences of religious controversy; certainly, literary critics discussing this material need to borrow from the nuanced appreciation of early modern polemical theology which history departments have formulated in recent years. But interdisciplinarity is a wholesome fashion, and it can work two ways. It can, as I argue in my first chapter, involve the forcible rehistoricising of canonical texts which have proved rather too successfully that they are for all time: texts where one needs to saw through the nacre of commentary to find the original stimulus, the grit of anti-Catholic prejudice. As the rest of the book goes on to contend, interdisciplinarity can also aid the thorough recovery of texts that have been neglected by the architects of the canon. In an age of spectacular confessional fragmentation it is sometimes easy to forget how much of what we take for granted in late twentieth-century England is built on an Anglican infrastructure. And within the academy, one needs to ask whether the criteria that cause some religious groups to be privileged in research terms, and others neglected, are protestantised in origin.

Though Tudor and Stuart Catholic history is only fitfully visible in university curricula, Catholics themselves have been interested in their ancestors for a very long time. From the beginnings of Catholic oppression in Britain, a genre existed which Hugh Aveling has called 'holy history' or 'salvation history'.[4] Based on collections of anecdotes including eye-witness accounts, exemplary tales and memoirs, and letters of confessors and martyrs, they were written to show the hand of God in the sufferings and martyrdom of their subjects, and in the deaths of the persecutors. There was also a concern to save biographical data for its potential usefulness in pressing the causes for canonisation of various English martyrs, a phenomenon which

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existed side by side with official and quasi-official veneration of them. This aim dominated the Collectanea of Christopher Grene, now preserved at Stonyhurst and Oscott, and, in the eighteenth century, the *Church History* of Charles Dodd (1737–42) and Bishop Challoner's biographical dictionary of missionary priests (1741–42).

With the nineteenth century, the era of Catholic emancipation and then of triumphalism, Catholic historians were given more public licence to plead their cause; and as so often, celebration was accompanied by stridency. Titles such as John Morris's *The Troubles of Our Catholic Forefathers* (1872–7) and Bede Camm's *In the Brave Days of Old* (1899) – with its shades of Horatius keeping the bridge – have unfairly invited some historians to conclude that the contents of many of these books are without objective value. Multi-volume biographical dictionaries, building on their forebears, characterised late-Victorian Catholic scholarship: Henry Foley's *Dictionary of the Members of the Society of Jesus* (1877–83), Joseph Gillow's *A Bibliographical Dictionary of the English Catholics* (1885–1902). The Catholic Record Society, founded in 1904, started publishing its invaluable editions of primary sources in 1905, and its periodical *Recusant History* has been counterparted by the *Innes Review* in Scotland. Catholic history has been unusually well-served by regional societies, illustrating the truth that academic historians ignore local ones at their peril.[5] Bio-bibliographical studies such as A. C. Southern's *English Recusant Prose*[6] (1950), Thomas Clancy's *Papist Pamphleteers* (1964) and Peter Milward's two-part *Religious Controversies of the Elizabethan (Jacobean) Age* (1968–78) have helped to clarify the complex, often dialogic nature of religious writing at this date. T. A. Birrell's inspirational presence at the University of Nijmegen lies behind much of the most fruitful post-war work on Catholic studies.[7]

The majority of twentieth-century English historians of post-Reformation English Catholicism have been Catholics themselves, or at least received Catholic education. Some have already been mentioned; but the list is long, encompassing Jesuits like Philip Caraman, Francis Edwards and Thomas McCoog, scholar-schoolmasters like J. C. H. Aveling and Michael Hodgetts, and the university academics J. J. Scarisbrick, Eamon Duffy, Brendan Bradshaw and Richard Rex. Within the last fifteen years Scarisbrick and Duffy, in particular, have mounted a high-profile revisionist critique of Reformation history in *The Reformation and the English People* (1984) and *The Stripping of the Altars* (1993), suggesting that the abuses that

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prompted the Continental Reformation were not characteristic of Britain, that Protestantism was not a popular movement but one imposed from above by Henry VIII and his ministers upon an unwilling populace, and that indigenous religious traditions were far more impoverished after the Reformation than before it.[8] Here the Catholicism of the historian has acted as a stimulus to fresh analysis in much the same way that gender studies or post-colonialism have done to others: an academic exploration of why one has the right to be aggrieved.[9]

But even though there are many ways that Catholics have an advantage in writing about Catholic history, non-Catholics are privileged in other respects: for one thing, they are not perceived as hagiographers. While there is nothing wrong with hagiography which is clearly signalled as such, most Catholic historians would be the last to deny that hagiography has sometimes resulted in an unnecessarily narrow and fictionalised scholarship. But there is a lingering feeling, among non-Catholics, that Catholic history by Catholic writers is bound to be hagiographical to some degree: a suspicion not helped by the way in which imprints on Catholic books, to this day, serve to reinforce an impression of marginality. Perhaps the proud imprimaturs on Victorian works of Catholic scholarship, and even a good number of twentieth-century ones, may still have power to kindle a residual anti-popery. But scanning the footnotes of this particular book will confirm that some things have still not changed about Catholic books and the English; Catholic scholarship, now as then, has a stronger association with Catholic presses in England and publishers on the Continent than with publishers like Cambridge University Press.

Christopher Haigh makes two necessary points in the preface to *English Reformations* (1993): that the link between Catholic research and Catholic conviction is not invariable, but that it is strong enough for other academics to assume that only Catholics are interested in Catholics. One historian, hearing that Haigh was not a Catholic, exploded ‘Then why does he write such things?’[10] Like Haigh, I am not a Catholic myself. Throughout my research life, people have usually assumed otherwise; and whilst I have found it flattering to be linked – however spuriously – with a grand past and present tradition of Catholic scholars, the assumption has not always been voiced neutrally. One can understand why the dust-jacket of Mary Heimann's fine study *Catholic Devotion in Victorian England* (1995)

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carries the message that the author is 'neither English nor a Catholic'. Yet it is true that she and I are slightly unusual, as non-Catholics who find Catholic matter significant and engaging enough to read up on. The idea that research on Catholics is inseparable from Catholic conviction may seem a minor social confusion, but it matters a great deal. Because of another fallacy still, that only paid-up members of religious or political bodies have an axe to grind, it is where prejudice can begin. Most academic books on literary history assume the reader is agnostic even where the subject is religious, since this is presumed to be the least offensive stance – or the most convertible academic currency, at least. This study tries to recognise that its likely audience is pluralist, more ideologically heterogenous than the Reformation by far: Catholics, Protestants, ecumenists, members of other world religions, the atheist, the agnostic, the adiaphorist and the uninterested.

Catholics, especially Elizabethan and twentieth-century ones, are often called religious conservatives; and sometimes this is true. It is no reason to ignore them; in a plea for the acknowledgement of contrast and opposition within literary history, Virgil Nemoianu has written that 'A "politically correct" attitude, honestly thought through to its true ends and complete implications, will result in a careful and loving study of the reactionary, not as an enemy but as an indispensable co-actor.'[11] And a further caution is necessary. This book does not use the case-history of Catholicism to figure reactionariness in general, which would misrepresent a good many Catholics, then and now; it suggests instead, less judgementally, that the experience of early modern English Catholics, and consequently their main modes of discourse, are comparable to the experience and writing of other types of dissident. It attempts to discuss Catholics on their own terms, but its definition of a Catholic is broad – one who frequented secret or illegal Catholic worship or practised specifically Catholic private devotion, with or without attendance at the worship of other denominations – and will be too broad for some.[12] Yet it is crucial to the distinction that I wish to draw between the heroic Catholic – the recusant, the confessor, the exile, the martyr, even, perhaps, the conspirator – and the Catholic pragmatists, the occasional conformists and the crypto-Catholics. Neither is more real or more typical than the other, and both are discernible as part of the implied audience in Catholic and anti-Catholic discourse. But with imaginative literature, the gap narrows;

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English Catholic imaginative literature in this period is extraordinarily interactive, and powerfully concerned with the didactic and autodidactic processes of creating heroes out of its readers.

Like many other, more fashionable modes of academic discourse in the past twenty years, Catholic analysis of English history borrows from apologia; but unlike them, it has acquired no substantial band of university camp-followers aiming to right historical wrongs. To point to the fact that Catholicism is an unfashionable minority study is not necessarily to praise it in a young-fogeyish manner, nor to denigrate the legitimacy of those minority studies that are currently fashionable, but it needs a little explanation. The twentieth-century historian sees a crucial difference between the unchosen cultural handicaps of race or gender, and those brought upon the individual by religious or political affiliation. With regard to the latter, sympathy is likely to vary widely according to whether the body in question is perceived as having been oppressive in other contexts; and between Marxist and neo-Marxist hostility, humanist embarrassment and feminist complaint, all churches have suffered. This is not the place to analyse the justice of the dismissal, but two points are worth considering: firstly, whether it is appropriate to the period and the country, and secondly, whether the effect it has had of driving the present-day Catholic hermeneutic underground has been conducive to academic fairness.

Equally irreducible, equally awkward, is the fact that some academics still refuse to acknowledge that the late twentieth century is supposed, in the West, to be post-Christian. Old-style, 'objective' academic discourse – in fact, a twentieth-century development that was never subscribed to by every academic – was less a declaration of open-mindedness or agnosticism than a gentleman's agreement to stop short of disputed territory. Now we can see that it was not invulnerable to the infiltration of received ideas: hence deconstruction, a radical shifting of the sites of controversy, and the jubilee spirit of revisionism. But any historian who acknowledges in print that membership of an exclusivist religious body has suggested his or her lines of research breaks a taboo, agitating the smooth waters of academic agnosticism. Duffy and Scarisbrick are well-known commentators on Catholic affairs, and one can infer from their writing in general that Catholic indignation goaded them to formulate their revisions of the English Reformation; but in their historical works, their Catholicism is not explicitly stated. Where a historian is a

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practising Christian of any denomination, there can arise a two-tier system of interpretation, where colleagues or students are familiar with the writer's convictions but the wider reading public need not be. Such historians often write with a powerful chained anger, utilising the insights of historical oppression but unable to admit to doing so. Coding and censorship are still with us, and necessitate an academic discourse which conceals religious belief as well as Catholicism.[13]

Catholicism, besides, is perhaps unique in the strength of the identification it demands between the Reformation and now. The Church of England has only ever made partial claims to universality, and was so clearly a state construct that historians indifferent or hostile to its claims can dismiss it easily, or discuss it simply as an instrument of authority. Conversely, to call someone a puritan now is a judgement, not a plain description. The capacity of Protestant Christianity for spontaneous re-invention has resulted in different names for similar movements: one reason why the idea of a Puritan has been so open to reductive redefinition by Christopher Hill and others.[14] Besides, there is something about the notion of Protestantism – certainly not always the same as Protestantism itself – which makes it especially acceptable to the academic mind: the sceptical, the enquiring, as against the authoritarian, the dogmatic and the superstitious.[15] But Catholicism, despite the differences between its manifestations in the sixteenth century and the twentieth, places such emphasis on tradition that it cannot be read as anything other than itself; and so, responses to current Catholicism have seemed to determine whether one welcomes or shuns it as a subject for historical enquiry. If one thinks of it as inordinately powerful and unconscionably conservative under John Paul II, one's sympathy for its persecuted representatives in early modern Britain is likely to be diminished; and thence there arises a secularised anti-popery.

Part of the reason Puritans have been more studied than Catholics by university historians is that, while there are several twentieth-century Christian denominations which have Puritan characteristics, none call themselves Puritan; there are certainly Nonconformist historians of Puritanism, but none are denominational historians in the Catholic, or Methodist, or Quaker sense. There is still a dangerous myth abroad that denominational historians are an unscholarly breed, prone to hagiography, and quick to take offence

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at anyone coming from outside the fold. Puritanism, on the other hand, is a vacated name bright with suggestions of revolution: excellent material for scholarly empathy. And something of the same phenomenon is observable with the study of seventeenth-century radical religionists, the Ranters and their kindred. Both have demonstrated a remarkable ability to metamorphose with the times – Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down* (1978) tells one a good deal both about the 1640s and the 1960s. But when non-Catholics consider early modern Catholicism, their attitude is inevitably coloured by their views on Catholicism now. They may have an explicit or residual Protestant distaste for what they perceive as Catholic superstition or the commercialisation of miracles. They may have a twentieth-century anger at the Catholic position on women priests, or divorce, or contraception and the Third World. They may feel about all organised religion as Milton did about Catholicism: that it is the only kind of unacceptable creed, because it tries to impair the freedom of others. More mildly, as commented above, they may associate it with conservatism.

Historians' Athenian anxiety to identify newness has also led to the under-representation of Catholics. Study of the mutations of conservatism tends to characterise the second, corrective stage in any given historical debate. But even revisionism, like any corrective historiography, has had its terms defined by what came previously. There is no necessary connection at all points between Catholics and the conservative spirit – historians have always admitted that the English Jesuits attracted opprobrium for their newness – but because Catholicism prevailed in medieval England, the two have tended to be handcuffed together in discussions of Catholicism under the Tudors and Stuarts. And, undoubtedly, there is plenty of literary evidence indicating that some Catholics eschewed Protestantism for its novelty. But Protestants became Protestants not because the doctrinal changes were new, but because they were convinced of their efficacy; similarly, one should not assume that Catholics remained or became Catholics only out of conservative prejudice, not because they identified truth. The argument from visibility, how the Church had always been identifiable as such, was necessarily a conservative one; but it was only a part of the Catholics' polemical armoury, and not automatically convincing.[16]

As historians have recently reminded us, the brevity of Mary I's reign, and the timing of her death, show how much the Protestant

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consensus in England was dependent on chance: but it was a chance that muted the articulacy of English Catholics for the next century.[17] There is literary evidence that the reign of Edward VI was regarded as an aberration, not only by those hoping for royal patronage, but among publishers of popular verse whose trade depended on identifying common sentiments.[18] Panegyrists exploited the coincidence of Mary's name with the Virgin's, sent to re-evangelise England: Myles Hogarde, the best-known of them, related how 'Mary hath brought home Christ againe' to a realm filled with 'frantike infidelitie'.[19] In his poem presented to Mary I, William Forrest looked back with what now reads as a combination of prescience and unconscious bitter irony.

> So was ytt, It ys not yeat owte of remembraunce,
> moste odyous schysmys / this Royalme dyd late perturbe:
> Almoste, the moste parte / geavynge attendaunce:
> (aswell of Nobles / as the rustycall Scrubbe:
> withe Thowsandys in Cyteeis / and eke in Suburbe)
> to that all true Christian faythe dyd abhore:
> Receavynge plagys not yeat extyncte thearfore . . .[20]

But laments had characterised the Catholic voice during the reformers' depredations, during specific events like the Pilgrimage of Grace, and as a more general expression of dissension and despair; and lament was again, all too soon, to become a dominant Catholic genre. The period of this study covers the century which elapsed between Elizabeth I's Act of Uniformity and the Restoration: not because it is the only period in which interesting Catholic writing can be found, but because – taken as a whole – it was the period which most obviously encouraged the formulation of a various and distinct Catholic consciousness. Chapters three and four, chronological in arrangement, have more to say about this; yet, while they try to emphasize Catholic mental distinctiveness, they concentrate upon Catholic loyalism. Distinctiveness can be both oppositional and eirenical, and loyalism problematises any simple idea of Catholicism as an opposition culture.

The final success of the Protestant Reformation obviously had a lot to do with the fact that Elizabeth lived where Mary had died, but it was Elizabeth's positive actions which re-imposed it with an early decisiveness. The 1559 Act of Uniformity reinstated the 1552 Prayer Book, and the episcopal visitations of the same year saw to it that the royal supremacy and recent Crown injunctions were established

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