2 *Eamon Duffy*

Bare ruined choirs: remembering Catholicism in Shakespeare's England

Till fairly recently most scholars of late Tudor England thought of it as essentially a Protestant place in which Catholicism was a problematic dimension: the Roman Catholic clerical presence in Elizabethan and Jacobean England was a 'mission', and Catholicism was one of the alien elements against which early modern English identity was defined.

This is true no longer. As contemporary English life has increasingly divested itself of its Protestant character, we have come to look with fresh eyes at the religious complexities – one is tempted to say pluralism – of even so explicitly confessional a state as early modern England, and the continuing and pervasive influence of Catholicism as a political, religious and cultural force in the England of Elizabeth and James – the England of Shakespeare – has become more visible.

One aspect of this process of reassessment has been the recovery of the Catholic dimension of early modern English culture, most obvious in music and architecture, represented by William Byrd and Inigo Jones, but more recently and sensationally focused on the reappraisal of Shakespeare's religion – of which not the least significant aspect may be the perception that he might actually have had a religion. What follows is an essay in literary history, intended to further in a modest and tentative sort of way the reappraisal of the religious significance – or at any rate the religious context – of the work of England's national bard. And it focuses on a discussion of the language of a single line in Sonnet 73.

> That time of yeare thou maist in me behold
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few doe hange
> Upon those boughes which shake against the could,
> *Bare ruin'd quiers, where late the sweet birds sang.*

Few human enterprises are more certainly doomed than the attempt to provide precise historical expositions of Shakespeare's Sonnets: these most elusive of poems defeat and will no doubt continue to defeat all attempts to decipher the story or stories they tell, or to identify the contemporary allusions they might be held to make, and Sonnet 73 is no exception. But its fourth line deploys an image which, whatever its precise reference, could hardly have been written at any time before the late Elizabethan age, and one which represents Shakespeare's appropriation of a highly charged contemporary historical trope, laden with contentious social and religious significance. Shakespeare's one-line evocation of the ruins of England's monastic past, the ruins of England's Catholicism, can hardly have been casual or unselfconscious, for in Elizabethan England these walls had, if not ears, then mouths, and, in the mode in which Shakespeare chose to evoke them, cried out against the cultural revolution which had shaped the Elizabethan religious settlement.

It is well recognized that the Henrician dissolution of the monasteries was crucial for the emergence in Tudor England of an acute sense of the *mutability* of even the most apparently permanent institutions: ruins, as Margaret Aston has demonstrated, make historians. The overthrow of monasticism brought not just the destruction and pillage of some of England's greatest buildings but a massive transfer of land and influence, a drastic shift from clerical to lay patronage within the church, and a fundamental reorientation of English society. Early modern English men and women were intensely conscious of all these elements of tranformation: as Antonio in *The Duchess of Malfi* declared,

> all things have their end
> Churches and cities (which have diseases like to men)
> must have like death that we have.[1]

Protestant conviction complicated these feelings: scholarly reformers such as John Bale might loath monasticism, and its 'superstitious mansyons' harbouring 'lasy lubbers and poppysh bellygoddes', and yet lament the destruction of venerable monastic buildings and great monastic libraries, 'those noble and precyouse monumentes' of the past. The first great county chorographer of Elizabethan England was William Lambarde, and his *Perambulation of Kent*, published in 1576, was a seminal influence on the development of Elizabethan antiquarianism and chorography. He was also an ardent Protestant, who reflected thus on the monastic ruins at Canterbury:

> And therefore, no marvaile, if wealth withdrawn, and opynion of holynesse remooved, the places tumble headlong to ruine and decay.
>
> In which part, as I cannot on the one side, but in respect of the places themselves pitie and lament this generall decay . . . So on the other side, considering the maine Seas of sinne and iniquitie, wherein the worlde (at those daies) was almost wholy drenched, I must needes take cause, highly to praise God that hath thus mercifully in our age delivered us, disclosed Satan,

> unmasked these Idoles, dissolved their Synagogs, and raced to the grounde all monuments of building erected to superstition and ungodlynesse.
>
> And therefore, let every godly man ceasse with me from henceforth to marvaile, why Canterbury, Walsingham, and sundry such like, are now in these our daies becom in maner waste, since God in times past was in them blasphemed moste: and let the souldiers of Satan and superstitious mawmetrie, howle and cry out with the heathen poet . . .
>
> The Gods each one, by whose good ayde this empire stoode upright
> Are flowne: their entries and their altars eke, abandoned quight.[2]

For Lambarde, bare ruined choirs, therefore, might be poignant reminders of vanished greatness, but they evoked no fond memories of sweet monastic birdsong: the monastic past was an abomination, the monks and their houses 'harborowes of the Devil and the Pope . . . which in horrible crimes contended with Sodome, in unbeliefe matched Ierusalem, and in follie of superstition exceeded all Gentilitie'. By the just judgement of God, therefore, Canterbury and places like it 'came suddenly from great wealth, multitude of inhabitants and beautiful buildings, to extreme poverty, nakedness and decay'.

Few Elizabethan or Jacobean antiquaries shared Lambarde's doctrinaire hostility to the religious past whose visible remains increasingly fascinated them and their readers. Notoriously, John Stow's *Survey of London*, one of the highwater marks of Elizabethan antiquarianism, published in 1598 and vastly expanded in 1603, is saturated through and through with nostalgia for the medieval golden age which had shaped the London townscape and its social and religious institutions. At one level, Stow's work is a sustained lament for the decay of sociability and old decency which he believed was one of the major consequences of the Reformation shattering of ancient buildings and the monuments they contained. The destruction of the Catholic past had been motivated by greed, not goodness, typified in the covetousness which had led men to pluck up the very funeral brasses from the 'defaced tombes and prints of plates torn up and carried away', bringing oblivion to the honourable dead and their good works, 'a great injurie to the living and the dead . . . but not forborne by many, that eyther of a preposterous zeal or of a greedy minde spare not to satisfy themselves by so wicked a meanes'.[3]

Stow's *Survey*, therefore, did more than lovingly map the bare ruin'd choirs of Shakespeare's London. It offered a benign account of the antique world, when 'service sweat for duty not for meed' (*As You Like It* 2.4.19), a world which had been lost in the dismantling of the early Tudor religious system. His famous description of midsummer religious celebrations such as the St John's fires, with its idealised evocation of 'every man's doore being shadowed with green birch, long fennel, St John's wort, Orphin, white lillies and such like', of hospitable houses hung about with lamps in honour of the saints, is notorious for its social romanticism:

> In the moneths of June and July, on the Vigiles of festivall days . . . in the evening after the sunne setting, there were usually made Bonefiers in the streetes, every man bestowing wood or labour towards them: the wealthier sort also before their doores neare to the saide Bonefiers, would set out tables . . . furnished with sweete breade and goode drinke . . . whereunto they would invite their neighbours and passengers also to sit, and bee merry with them in great familiaritie, praysing God for his benefites bestowed on them. These were called Bonefiers aswell of good amitie amongst neighbours that, being before at controversie, were there by the labour of others reconciled, and made of bitter enemies, loving friendes, as also for the vertue that a great fire hath to purge infection of the ayre.

Stow's private papers from the 1560s reveal his hostility to successive manifestations of Protestant zeal in the city, and his memoranda are openly sympathetic to the Catholic clergy rabbled by the London crowds. Unsurprisingly, he was vehemently and probably correctly suspected of being 'a great favourer of papistry', and his house and books were raided and ransacked for incriminating material in 1569. Stow was gradually to come to accept and endorse the Elizabethan settlement and its leaders such as Parker and Whitgift, but the whole drift of his published work was towards a positive reappraisal of the Catholic past, worlds away from the Reformation polemic of Bale or Lambarde. Nostalgia for the visible remains of Catholicism, and a backward and approving look at the religion which had produced them, were therefore hard to separate. The ruins of the monasteries were only the most striking example of the general destruction of the forms of the old religion. From the outset of the Elizabethan settlement, the fate of religious buildings in general, from monasteries to chantries, from cathedrals to parish churches, were intimately intertwined with the ideological systems they represented. That interconnection had been revealed at the start of Elizabeth's reign in a London event in which Stow took an intense interest, the furore surrounding the burning of St Paul's after the steeple was struck by lightning on Wednesday 4 June 1561.

St Paul's Cathedral was very much the symbolic focus of Reformation in London: in Edward's and Mary's reigns ritual change there had become for conservative commentators a barometer of the progress of Protestantism more generally, and this remained true as the main features of the Elizabethan settlement were set in place. The burning of the Cathedral in a freak storm, on the feast of Corpus Christi of all days, therefore, was certain to elicit pointed confessional commentary, and so the Elizabethan regime moved swiftly to forestall such comment. James Pilkington, Bishop of Durham, preached on the fire at Paul's Cross the following Sunday, declaring that the fire was a sign of the wrath of God against the sins of the time, in particular the decay of obedience to properly constituted authority – he called his hearers to 'humble obedience to the lawes and superior powers, whiche vertue is much decayed in our days', and he announced the tightening up of the laws 'agaynst persons disobedyent aswell in causes of religion, as civil – to the great rejoicing of his auditours'. He added that the profanation of the cathedral by walking, jangling, brawling and bargaining in service time was a particularly heinous offence before God: the nub of his sermon, however, was an answer to the evil-tongued persons who were already spreading it abroad that this 'token of God's deserved ire' was a direct response to the 'alteration or rather Reformation' of religion. The sermon therefore concluded with a lengthy review of great church fires of history, designed to show that St Paul's and other famous churches 'both nigh to this realm and far off, where the church of Rome hath most authority', had frequently been the targets of similar acts of God. He concluded that 'every man should judge, examine and amend himself, and embrace, believe, and truly follow the word of God' lest worse calamities follow.[4]

Pilkington's sermon was a sign of the seriousness of the early Elizabethan regime's anxiety about the capital which conservative critics of the religious settlement had already made of the fire four days after its outbreak. It was rapidly answered in a pamphlet called *An Addicion, with an Apologie to the Causes of the Brinnynge of Paule's Church*, attributed to John Morwen, Bishop Bonner's chaplain. This short pamphlet was a highly effective piece of polemic, brief, forceful and telling. It began with a resume of biblical examples of judgements by burning, from Sodom and Gomorrah through the idolators Dathon and Abiron the prophets of Baal, and the destruction of Jerusalem itself because of the apostosy of Israel. The fire at St Paul's was a judgement not on sin in general but on London's infidelity and apostasy in particular. St Paul's had been burned because it had first been profaned by a false religion. Talking, buying and selling in church were bad, but

> there be worse abuses, as blaspheming God in lying sermons, polluting the temple with schismatical service, destroying and pulling down holy altars, that were set up by good blessed men . . . yea, where the altar stood of the Holy Ghost, the new bishops have made a place to set their tails upon, and there sit in judgement on such as be Catholic and live in the fear of God.

The new religion was a mushroom growth, 'never heard tell of before Luther's time, which is not forty years old': therefore we must obey Jeremiah the prophet: 'Stand upon the way of the blessed fathers, and consider and ask of the old paths and high-ways, which is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find refreshing to your souls.' And Pilkington's portrayal of the Middle Ages as a time of superstition and error was dismissed as a lie – for then

> God was served devoutly night and day, the people lived in fear of God, every one in his vocation, without reasoning and contention of matters of religion, but referred all such things to learned men in general councils and universities . . . then was the commandments of God and virtue expressed in living, now all is talk and nothing in living: then was prayer, now is prating, then was virtue, now is vice; then was the building up of churches, houses of religion and hospitals, where prayer was had night and day, hospitality kept and the poor relieved: now is pulling down and destroying of such houses . . . by means whereof God's glory is destroyed and the commonwealth impoverished; then was plenty of all things, now is scarceness of all things: therefore *operibus credite*; the fruit will show whether then was superstition and ignorance, or now in these days.[5]

The *Addition* is a short work – it runs to only six pages of print in the Parker Society edition of Pilkington's works – but it is an accomplished and damaging piece of conservative propaganda, and stung Pilkington into an elaborate *Confutation* more than twenty times as long. Several of its themes had a long future ahead of them as staples of recusant polemic against the Reformation, not least the appeal to walk in the old ways.

In the early years of the settlement this was a voice which enraged and alarmed the advocates of Protestantism, who paid it the compliment of mocking it. In 1562 Pilkington, in his commentary on Haggeus, conplained bitterly of the widespread murmuring against the cleansing of the churches, such 'lewd sayings' as

> 'What shall I do at Church? I may not have my beads; the church is like a waste barn: there is no images nor saints to worship and make curtsey to: little God in the box is gone: there is nothing but a little reading or preaching, that I cannot tell what it means: I had as lief keep me at home:' This is a woeful saying.

Jewel took up the same woeful sayings for attack in the *Second Book of Homilies*, in the following year, when he makes two ignorant wives lament: 'Alas Gossip, what shall we do at church, since all the saints were taken away, since all the goodly sights we were wont to have are gone, since we cannot hear the like piping, singing, chanting and playing upon the organs that we could before'.[6]

It is in the light of this popular complaint against the official imposition of 'bare ruin'd quiers', not only in the monasteries but in the parishes, that we should understand the early Elizabethan regime's preoccupation with plaster and whitewash, and against which we should read John Shakespeare's involvement in the defacing and whitewashing of images in Stratford. The Elizabethan injunctions of 1559 recognized that the very stones of the parish churches remembered their Catholic past, and attempted to bulldoze away that material memory: the clergy were enjoined to

> take away, utterly extinct and destroy all shrines, covering of shrines, all tables and candlesticks, trundles or rolls of ware, pictures, paintings and all other monuments of feigned miracles, pilgrimages, idolatry and superstition, *so that there remain no memory of the same* in walls, glasses, windows or elsewhere

> within their churches or houses. And they shall exhort all their parishioners to do the like within their several houses.[7]

The trouble was, in many communities this purging of the memory just did not happen. Stratford, like other conservative towns, was slow to implement the injunction, and, notoriously, John Shakespeare was chamberlain when, three years into the settlement, the corporation eventually got round to the removal of the rood-loft and other images. He was chief alderman in October 1571, and therefore deputy to the Protestant bailiff Adrien Quiney, when the latter secured the corporation's agreement to sell off the parish's Catholic vestments.[8]

In the late 1920s the editors of the Stratford corporation accounts took these activities as a sign of John Shakespeare's ardent Puritanism. Nowadays we know better, and it is the tardiness of this action which strikes us, together with the fact that the Stratford purges of 1562 and 1571 were almost certainly a response to external prodding rather than spontaneous zeal. Sales of illegally retained Catholic vestments and books were being forced on the localities by the ecclesiastical authorities all over England in the late 1560s and early 1570s, as their subversive potential as focuses of vestigial loyalty to the old religion was increasingly felt. This perception had been given frightening particularity in the Northern Rebellion on 1569, when concealed altarstones and holy-water vats were resurrected from the dunghills and gardens where they had been buried and became the focus for resistance to the Elizabethan settlement.

In 1571, indeed, Stratford had acquired a new bishop, Nicholas Bullingham, recently arrived as Bishop of Worcester. While still Bishop of Lincoln, Bullingham had presided in 1566 over a systematic purge of 'monuments of superstition' from the churches of Lincolnshire, and in the same years had been invoked as visitor against a Provost of King's College, Cambridge, suspected of being popishly inclined: at King's too Bullingham presided over the destruction of a 'great deal of popish stuff' from the chapel. It is no surprise therefore to find the disposal of the remaining relics of popery taking place at Stratford soon after the arrival of this Protestant new broom.

The attitudes of the man and woman in the pew towards all this are hard to assess, and must often have been ambivalent. In the late 1560s a Yorkshire yeoman who had been part of the syndicate which had bought up the timber and bells from the steeple of Roche Abbey was asked by his son 'whether he thought well of the religious persons and the religion that was then used'. When he replied that he had indeed thought well of the monks, having had no occasion to think otherwise, his son asked 'then how came it to pass you was so ready to distroy and spoil the thing you thought well of? What could I do, said He: might I not as well as others have some profit of the Spoil of the Abbey? For I did see all would away: and therefore I did as others did'.[9] Consciences continued to stir uneasily about all such spoil. Nicholas Roscarrock told the story of Jane Burlace, a farmer's wife from Rejarra in Cornwall who took up one of the four great stones used as a rest for relics and crosses on the annual Rogationtide procession to the parochial chapel of St Neghton, and used it to make a cheese press. When Mistress Burlace died in November 1582, however, her spirit could not rest till this sacrilege had been put right: accordingly, the stone 'was in the night tyme carryed back by one willed so by her after her death or by some thinge assuminge her personage and remaineth, I think, still where it did'. Roscarrock, a recusant antiquary, was hardly a neutral reporter, but he claimed to have had this story 'from report of such as were of her kinsfolkes and friends who had cause to know it', and the ambivalences revealed in the episode must have been common enough.[10]

Shakespeare grew up, therefore, in a world where attitudes towards the material remains of the Catholic past were more often than not a touchstone of loyalty to or disatisfaction with the Elizabethan settlement. Consider, for example, the most universal of all these reminders of the Catholic past, stained glass.

The English Reformation was unusual in the extent of its hostility towards pictures in glass, which were virtually never the object of cult. The Edwardian and Elizabethan injunctions had called for the removal of all Catholic stories and images 'so that there remain no memory of the same in walls, glass windows or elsewhere within their churches'. The Elizabethan injunctions had added the practical qualification that windows were not to be destroyed if this meant the wind and weather would be let in. Zealous Protestant bemoaned this pragmatism, which left intact so many 'monuments of superstition', but even William Harrison, the ardent Protestant polemicist whose *Description of England* celebrated and justified the removal of screens, images and all the other furniture of the old religion from the parish churches as 'altogether needless' in a reformed church, noted phlegmatically:

> only the stories in glass windows excepted, which, for want of sufficient store of new stuff and by reason of extreme charge that should grow by the alteration of the same into white glass throughout the realm, are not altogether abolished in most places at once but by little and little suffered to decay, that white glass may be provided and set up in their rooms.[11]

Stained glass remained everywhere, therefore, and was a potential focus of intense ideological feeling. The recusant antiquary and chorographer of Worcestershire, Thomas Habington, in whose house Henry Garnet was arrested after the Gunpowder Plot, left a lavish and detailed account of the great narrative and doctrinal series of windows in Malvern Priory, 'the glasse whereof is a mirror wherein we may see how to beleeve, how to live, how to dye, how to pass through temporality to eternity'.[12]

Consider, by contrast, the attitude of the Cheshire Puritan John Bruen to the glass in his own parish church in the late 1580s, where on succeeding to the lordship of the manor he found still

> many superstitious images and idolotraous pictures in the painted windowes, and they so thicke and dark that there was . . . scarce the breadth of a groat of white glass amongst them: he knowing the truth of God, that though the Papists will have images to bee lay mens bookes, yet they teach no other lessons but of lyes, nor any doctrines but of vanities to them that professe to learne by them: and considering that the dumbe and darke images by their painted coates and colours, did both darken the light of the Church, and obscure the brightness of the Gospell, hee presently tooke order, to pull downe all those painted puppets and popish idols, in a warrantable and peaceful manner, and of his own coste and charge, repaired the breaches, and beautified the windows with white and bright glasse again.[13]

These contested and contending views were not merely current in the 1590s, when Shakespeare's Sonnets were being written, but had been built into the heart of recusant complaint literature and apologetic. As government pressure on the recusant community mounted, the material ruins of the monastic and Catholic past became emblematic not only of the condition of the Catholic community but of the calamities which the Reformation had brought on England itself, not only in the destruction of right doctrine and religious practice but in the overthrow of charity, social deference and the roots of community. This is the lament for the shrine at Walsingham usually attributed to St Philip Howard:

Bitter, bitter, o to behold
The grass to grow
Where the walls of Walsingham
So stately did show.
Such were the works of Walsingham
While she did stand;
such are the wracks as now do show
Of that holy land.
Level, level with the ground
The towers do lie,
which with their golden glittering tops
Pierced once to the sky.
Where were gates no gates are now
The ways unknown
Where the press of peers did pass
While her fame far was blown.
Owls do shriek where the sweetest hymns
Lately were sung;
Toads and serpents hold their dens
Where the palmers did throng.
Weep, weep, O Walsingham,

whose days are nights,
Blessings turned to blasphenmies,
Holy deeds to despites.
Sin is where our Lady sat,
Heaven turned is to hell.
Satan sits where our Lord did sway:
Walsingham, O, farewell.[14]

The lament for Walsingham, however, is only one example of a whole genre current in the 1590s, like this ballad, for possession of which Thomas Hale of Walthamstow was indicted before the Essex assizes in 1594:

Weepe, weepe, and still I weepe,
For who can chuse but weepe,
To thyncke how England styll,
In synne and heresy doth sleepe.

The Christian faythe and catholick,
Is everywhere detested,
In holy servyce, and such like,
Of all degrees neglected.

The sacramentes are taken awaye,
The holy order all,
Religious men do begg astraye,
To ground their houses fall.

The Bushppes and our pastors gone,
Our Abbottes all be deade,
Deade (alas) alyve not one,
Nor other in their steede.

The Churches gaye defaced be,
our altars are thrown downe,
The walles left bare, a greefe to see,
That once coste maney a Crowne.

The monumentes and lefe of Sayntes
Are Brent and torne by vyolence,
Some shedd the holy Sacramentes,
O Christe they wondrous pacyence.[15]

There was far more at stake in all this than the fate of buildings or even a change of doctrine. In this complaint literature the decay of the externals of Catholicism reflected and indeed had caused the collapse of the moral fibre of society: grief for the bare ruined choirs was the objective correlative for despair over the collapse of social value. Reformation meant ruin, in more senses than one. William Blundell, Catholic squire of Little Crosby in Lancashire in the early 1590s, expressed the matter thus:

The tyme hath been wee hadd one faith,
And strode aright one ancient path,
The tyme is now that each man may
See newe Religions coynd each day.
Sweet Jesu, with thy mother mylde,
Sweete Virgine mother, wth thy chylde,
Angells and Saints of each degree,
Redresse our contrees miserie.

The tyme hath beene the prelate's dore
Was seldome shott against the pore,

The tyme is now, so wives goe fine,
They take not thought the beggar kyne.

The tyme hath been feare made us quake
To sinn, least god should us forsake,
The tyme is now the lewdest knave
Is sure (hee'l say) God will him save.

The tyme hath been, with in this land
One's woord as good as was his band;
The tyme is now, all men may see,
New faithes have kild old honestie.

Sweet Jesu, with thy mother mylde,
Sweete Virgine mother, with thy chylde,
Angells and Saints of each degree,
Redresse our contrees miserie.[16]

These poetic products of the 1580s and 1590s were matched by the emergence about the same time of a number of prose texts which similarly constructed an idealized Catholic past, keyed to the contemplation of its physical ruins in both the parish and the monastery. The best-known and most elaborate of these texts is the anonymous *Rites of Durham* of 1593, which lovingly reconstructed not only the layout of every altar, tomb and painted window in the Abbey church but also the monastic liturgy for which they provided the setting. *The Rites of Durham* is written in language deliberately charged with the sweetness of nostalgia, like the description of the altarpiece of the Jesus altar:

> All of the hole Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ most richlye & curiously sett furth in most lyvelie colours all like the burninge gold, as he was tormented and as he honge on the cross which was a most lamentable sight to behold.

The monastic liturgy is depicted throughout as beautiful and affecting, 'all singinge reioycing and praysing God most devoutly', and the humility of the monks and their charity to the poor is stressed. The villains of the *Rites of Durham* are those who defaced and threw down the monuments of the church, 'lewde disposed personns, who despised antiquities and worthiness of monuments after the suppression of Abbeys', above all the first Elizabethan Dean, the Genevan minister Dean Whittingham and his wife, who took holy stones to make door steps and salting blocks, and who made a washing house for laundresses out of the century garth where the Priors were buried, 'for he could not abyde anye auncyent monument, nor nothing that appertayned to any godlie Religiousness or monasticall liffe'. And in the same mode as Roscarrock's story of Mistress Burlace's ghost and the cheese press, the *Rites* includes the story of a mysterious aand comely old beggarman who warned a Durham householder whose courtyard was paved with gravestones from the Cathedral 'that whilest those stones were theire nothinge wolde prosper aboute the house and after divers of his children and others died so he caused them to be removed into the Abbey yard where now they are'.[17]

The *Rites of Durham* was probably compiled by William Claxton, squire of Wynyard, who died in 1597. Claxton, a dedicated antiquary and a correspondent of Stow's, to whom he loaned many books and manuscripts, was not, it should be noted, a recusant, though he had close relatives who were. He may have had the assistance of George Clyff, the last monk of Durham, who effectively conformed to the new church in 1559, even though he never signed the Elizabethan articles (despite which he held a series of livings in the diocese of Durham and even retained his stall in the Cathedral till his death in 1595). It is worth remininding ourselves that so blatantly papistical a text, and so positive an assessment of the monastic past, could survive and articulate itself in literary form down to the 1590s among men who outwardly conformed to the Protestant establishment.[18]

A close parochial equivalent to the *Rites of Durham* is the now famous and familiar account written by the unquestionably recusant gentleman Roger Martin of the last days of the old religion in the Suffolk parish of Long Melford. In Martin's oft-quoted account the same saturated sweetness of descriptive language is in evidence, for example in the description of the image of our Lady of Pity, 'a fair image of our Blessed Lady, having the afflicted body of her dear son, as he was taken down, off from the Cross, lying along in her lapp, the tears, as it were, running down pittyfully upon her beautiful cheeks, bedewing the said sweet body of her son'. Martin wrote not merely to record the glory which had once filled the bare ruin'd choir of Long Melford, but as a gesture of resistance and of hope for the future: he lovingly details the *disjecta membra* of the pre-Reformation ornaments of the church, some of which were 'in my house much decayed, and the same I hope my heires will repaire, and restore again, one day'. And he offers an implicit criticism of the Protestant present by projecting an idealized account of the ritual life of Henrician Long Melford, in which gorgeous ceremonial and the sacred calendar cemented the bonds of deference and patronage between rich and poor. In a passage on bonfires uncannily reminiscent of Stow's more famous account, on which indeed it may be modelled, Martin presents the same picture of flower-bedecked plenty, shared in neighbourly charity, 'and in all these bonefires, some of the honest and more civil poor neighbours were called in, & sat at the board, with my grandfather'.[19]

This was a recusant document, which inevitably emphasized the superiority of the old religion and its benign effects on society. But as we have seen such perceptions were not confined to Catholics. Protestant polemicists denounced the conservative folk-culture of conformist parishioners for their backward glances at the fleshpots of Egypt, revealed in proverbial saws such as 'It was merry world when the Mass was, for all things then were cheap'. In 1581 George Gifford's fictional Essex countryman, Atheos, was loud in repudiation of the Pope and all idolatry, but looked back to England's Catholic past as a time of communal harmony and good fellowship.

> I will follow our forefathers: now there is no love: then they lived in friendship, and made merrie together, now there is no neighbourhood, now every man for himelfe, and are ready to pull one another by the throate.

His Protestant interlocutor, Zelotes, foamed with indignation at such perverse romanticism:

> Ye follow your owne fond and doting opinion that ye imagine a thing which never was: for the world hath ever bene like it selfe, full of debate and strife, a very few in all ages which have had true love.[20]

Nor was it Catholics alone who applied this romanticism specifically to the monasteries. We have seen that the compiler of the *Rites of Durham*, of all texts, was probably a conformist. He was far from being alone. Michael Sherbrook, Elizabethan rector of Wickersley in the East Riding of Yorkshire, completed a treatise on the *Fall of Religious Houses* in 1591. It is an extraordinary work from the pen of an Anglican incumbent, for it was a sustained defence of the monasteries as good landlords and benign employers, centres of charity and industry. Sherbrook had no doubt that England had been in steep moral decline since the Reformation,

> for the estate of the realm hath come to more Misery since King Henry 8 his time, than ever it did in all the time before: If it be a Misery to have more theives, whores, extortioners, usurers and contentious persons striving the one against another in suits of law, and to be short, far more Beggars than ever was before.

The history of Reformation England was one long sequence of 'the going away, or rather driving away of godly devotion, and the bringing in of Carnall liberty, making small Concience, or rather none at all, of most things'. Anyone who compared pre- and post-Reformation England must

agree, Sherbrook thought, that the 'Builders and Maintayners of monasteries' 'were far wiser in building of them, than we in destroying them, and the governors of the Common Weale then far better'.[21]

Sherbrooke is an extreme case, though in the light of Ian Doyle's identification of the conformist Anglican authorship of the *Rites of Durham* he looks a little less isolated than he once seemed: at any rate, some of his views were evidently common enough. In 1589 Francis Trigge, a Lincolnshire cleric, published a defence of the Reformation entitled 'An apologie or Defence of our dayes against the vaine murmurings and complaints of many', in which he admitted that 'many do lament the pulling downe of the abbayes, they say it was never merrie world since: they highly commend their liberalitie to the poore, their curtesie to their tenants, their commoditie to the commonwealth'. Trigge flatly rejected all this as so much moonshine: in fact, he thought, the monasteries had been full of

> pryde, idlenesse, fullnesse of breade and unmercifulnesse. In so much that the fatnesse and haughtiness and idleness of monkes, came into a proverbe amongst all men: in so much, that idle persons were called abbey lubbers: fatt men were said to have abbotts faces.[22]

We have travelled a roundabout route, but I hope by now it will be evident where we are going. Sonnet 73 was probably written in the late 1590s. Religion is neither its subject matter nor the primary source of its poetic energy. Its allusion to the Reformation, and the monasteries, is certainly oblique and perhaps unconscious. Yet in the fraught religious atmosphere of the last decade of the old Queen's life, its phrasing decisively aligns Shakespeare against the Reformation: line 4's evocation of monastic ruins and the 'sweet birds' who had once sung there must have sent to its first reader's a clear and unambiguouslly *un*Protestant message. It is not of course a line which need only have been written by a Catholic: as we have seen, there were conforming Anglicans, such as Stow and Sherbrook, whose writings reveal just as positive an attitude to the Catholic past as is implicit in the phrase 'where late the sweet birds sang'.

But we can and should press Shakespeare's words for further nuances of meaning. Consider the significance here, for example, of the word 'late'.

> Where *late* the sweet birds sang:

The word 'late' there has in fact been taken by some commentators to rule out the application of the image to the monasteries at all, for in the 1590s the dissolution of the monasteries was two generations back, and so could hardly be described as 'late'.[23] On the contrary, however, I believe the telltale word 'late' once again aligns Shakespeare with a dangerously positive reading of the religious past. Delight in and reverence for the ruins of the old religion made the antiquarian movement as a whole a Trojan horse within the embattled Protestantism of Tudor and early Stuart England – as we have seen, there were many recusants and fellow travellers among the ranks of the antiquaries. But open assertions of the virtues of the last stages of monasticism were rare: antiquarian indignation at the depradations of the iconoclasts operated at a fair degree of generality – what such attacks represented was barbarism, the decay of reverence, lack of respect for traditional pieties. But we can see the carefully demarcated confessional limits of this attitude at work in one of the clasic antiquarian products of the early Stuart period, *Ancient Funeral Monuments*, by Shakespeare's admirer, the Hoghton protégé John Weever, published in 1631 but in preparation for two decades before that.

Weever's work, based on his own perambulations of the diocese of Canterbury, Rochester, London and Norwich, and on the collections of Sir Robert Cotton, is a celebration of the value and importance of funeral inscriptions, and as such it shares the general antiquarian hostility to iconoclasm. Weever quotes 'a late nameless versifier' to this effect:

> What sacred structures did our elders build
> Wherein Religion gorgeousaly sat deckt?
> Now all thrown downe, Religion exil'd
> Made Brothel-houses, had in base respect,
> Or ruin'd so that to the viewers eye
> In their own ruins they intombed lie:
> The marble urnes of their so zealous founders
> Are digged up, and turn'd to sordid uses;
> Their bodies are quite cast out of their bounders
> Lie un-interr'd. O greater what abuse is?
> Yet in this later age we now live in,
> This barbarous act is neither shame nor sinne.[24]

These were the sentiments used by Laud and his associates to justify their campaign to recover the beauty of holiness, and Weever's book, which is dedicated to Charles I, contains many asides which show that he supported the recovery of architectural and ritual dignity within the Church of England's worship. He also displays a regard for the religious customs of his home county of Lancashire which demonstrate an unmistakable animosity to advanced Protestantism and the campaign for a godly England, as in his remark that

> in the country where I was borne, the vulgar sort especially, doe most commonly swear by the cross of their own parish kirke, as they call it: and in ancient times, children used to sweare by the Sepulchres of their parents . . . But, with us in these dayes, I see no such reverence that sonnes have to their fathers hands or to their Sepulchres. I heare no swearing by Kirkes, Crosses or Sepulchres. I heare sometimes, i must confesse, forswearing to build Churches; swearing to pull downe crosses, or to deface and quite demolish all Funerall Monuments; swearing and protesting that all these are the remaines of AntiChriste, papisticall and damnable.[25]

Weever, then, is unmistakably friendly to much in the Catholic past, and to the idea of monasticism – he remarked in the dedicatory epistle that 'it may seeme, peradventure, unpleasing to some, for that I do speake so much of, and extoll the ardent pietie of our forefathers in the erecting of Abbeyes, priories, and such like sacred Foundations'. His account of the early Anglo-Saxon monastic movement, based on Bede and Capgrave, is glowing and laudatory: unlike Bale and other Reformation polemical historians, he thinks well of Augustine of Canterbury and appears to credit his miracles. He is also deeply sceptical of the motivation of the Henrician dissolutions, which he seen as driven by greed and santimonious hypocrisy.

It is all the more striking, therefore, that Weever adopts an unreconstructedly Protestant account of the *later* history of monasticism, as one long tale of decline and lapse from primitive virtue. He draws heavily on Lambarde in his treatment of the diocese of Canterbury, and retells and adds to many of Lambarde's scandalous anecdotes about popish superstition and gullibility in the later Middle Ages. He also reiterates the usual Reformation catalogue of the vices of the monks – 'pride, covetousnesse, insatiable luxurie, hypocrisie, blinde ignorance, and variable discord amongst the Church-men and all other our English votaries'. Despite the bad faith of the Henrician reformers, therefore, the 'fatal and finall period of the Abbeyes, Priories and such like religious structuires: with the casting out to the wide world of all their religious Votaries' was 'chiefly occasioned by their owne abhominable crying sinnes, more than by any other secondarie meanes'.[26]

Weever's ambivalence about England's monastic past reveals the inconsistencies and unresolved contradicitions within the thinking of the antiquarian movement about the past. For our purposes, however, it is of interest chiefly in highlighting the radically contrasting reading of the monastic past implicit in Shakespeare's phrase 'where *late* the sweet birds sang'. For Weever, monasticism had its glories: it was born in zeal and sanctity, it wrote a golden page in England's history, and its ruins, choice pieces of antiquity, were for that reason noble and to be treasured. But its *final* phase was sordid and disreputable: for Weever at any rate, of *late*, no sweet birds sang in England's quires, but only the carrion fowl of a corrupt system which had bred its own decay. By contrast, Shakespeare's 'where late the sweet birds sang' implies a reading of the last stages of monasticism, and of the roots of the Reformation, far more favourable to Catholicism.

Let me by way of conclusion make it clear what I have *not* been arguing. I do not think Sonnet 73 constitutes evidence that Shakespeare was a Catholic: as we have seen, its rhetoric, and the historical and religious attitudes implicit in that rhetoric, closely resemble the ideologically and theologically charged antiquarian and nostalgic writing about the religious past which seems to have been a special feature of the 1590s. That sort of writing would continue well into the Jacobean and Caroline periods, and it had a future in the mid- and late Stuart tradition of writing about sacrilege which we associate with Sir Henry Spelman. Some of these Elizabethan and early Stuart texts were indeed produced by recusants, but others by conformist fellow travellers such as Stow and Sherbrook and Claxton. As far as the evidence of Sonnet 73 takes us, Shakespeare might just as well be placed among the fellow travellers as among the Catholics. But if we cannot quite be sure that Shakespeare was a Catholic, it becomes clearer and clearer that he must have struck alert contemporaries as a most unsatisfactory Protestant.

Notes

1 Cited by Margaret Aston in her essay 'The dissolution of the monasteries and the sense of the past', *in Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London, 1984), p. 315.

2 William Lambarde, *A Perambulation of Kent* (facsimile ed., Trowbridge, 1970), pp. 267–8.

3 For this and the quotation that follows, John Stow, *A Survey of London*, ed. C. L. Kingsford (Oxford, 1908), vol. 1:229; vol. 2:75; and see Ian Archer, 'The nostalgia of John Stow', in D. L. Smith, R. Strier and D. Bevington (eds), *The Theatrical City: Culture, Theatre and Politics in London 1576–1649* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 17–34.

4 Official accounts of the burning by the regime in *A true report of the burninyng of the steple and churche of Poules in London* (1561) (*STC* 19930), and in W. Sparrow Simpson (ed.) *Documents Illustrating the History of St Paul's Cathedral*, Camden Society, ns 26 (1880), pp. 113–19. See also Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 232–3.

5 Morwen's tract was included with a refutation in *The burnynge of Paules Church in London in the yeare of oure Lord 1561* (1563), reprinted, in *The Works of James Pilkington, BD, Lord Bishop of Durham*, ed. James Schofield (Parker Society, 1842), pp. 481–6.

6 *Sermons or Homelies Appointed to be Read in Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth of Famous memory* (London, 1833), p. 381.

7 W. H. Frere (ed.), *Visitation Articles and Injunctions of the Period of the Reformation, vol. III 1559–1575* (Alcuin Club, vol. XVI, 1910), p. 16. Injunction 23, my emphasis.

8 R. Savage and Edgar Fripp (eds), *Minutes and Accounts of the Corporation of Stratford upon Avon* (Publications of the Dugdale Society, Oxford, 1921–30), vol. 1:137–41; vol. 2:54.

9 A. G. Dickens (ed.), *Tudor Treatises* (Yorkshire Archaeological Society, 1959), p. 125.

10 Nicholas Orme (ed.), *Nicholas Roscarrock's Lives of the Saints: Cornwall and Devon* (Devon and Cornwall Record Society, 1992), pp. 94, 160.

11 William Harrison, *The Description of England*, ed. G. Edelen (Washington, 1994), pp. 35–6: Richard Marks, *Stained Glass in England During the Middle Ages* (London, 1993), pp. 231–2.

12 J. Amphlett (ed.), *A Survey of Worcestershire by Thomas Habington* (Worcester Historical Society, Oxford, 1895), vol. 2, pp. 177–8.

13 William Hinde, *A Faithfull Remonstrance of the Holy Life and Happy Death of John Bruen* (London, 1641), p. 78.

14 *The New Oxford Book of Sixteenth Century Verse*, ed. E. Jones (Oxford, 1991), pp. 550–1.

15 F. G. Emmison, *Elizabethan Life: Disorder* (Chelmsford, 1970), pp. 59–61.

16 T. E. Gibson (ed.), *Crosby Records* (Chetham Society, 1887), pp. 28–31.

17 J. T. Fowler (ed.), *Rites of Durham: being a description or brief declaration of all the ancient monuments, rites, and customs belonging or being within the monastical church of Durham before the suppression, written 1593* (Surtees Society, vol. 103, 1903 repr. 1964), pp 33, 61–2.

18 A. I. Doyle, 'William Claxton and the Durham Chronicles', in James P. Carley and Colin G. C. Tite, *Books and Collectors 1200–1700* (London, 1997), pp. 335–55, esp. 347–9.

19 Martin's account is edited in David Dymond and Clive Payne, *The Spoil of Melford Church* (Salient Press, 1992), pp. 1–9.

20 George Gifford, *A Briefe Discourse of certaine points of religion, which is among the common sorts of Christians, which may be termed the Countrie Divinitie* (London, 1601).

21 Dickens, *Tudor Treatises*, pp. 90–1.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

23 For example, S. Greenblatt *et al.* (eds), *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York, 1997), note 1 to Sonnet 73, p. 1947.

24 John Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments With In the United Monarchie of Greate Britaine and the Islands adiacent, with the dissolved Monasteries therein contained* (London, 1631), p. 4.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 37–8.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 73, 115.